DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 889 CS 217 847

AUTHOR	Bauman, Amy, Ed.; Peterson, Art, Ed.
TITLE	The Quarterly of the National Writing Project, 2001.
INSTITUTION	National Writing Project, Berkeley, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
ISSN	ISSN-0896-3592
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	174p.; Published quarterly.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Writing Project, 2105 Bancroft #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042 (Annual subscription, $15). Tel: 510-642-0963; Fax: 510-642-4545; e-mail: nwp@socrates.berkeley.edu.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Quarterly of the National Writing Project; v23 n1-4 2001
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Process Approach (Writing); Program Descriptions; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills; Writing Workshops

ABSTRACT

Articles in this publication address the writing process, teaching writing, and research on the teaching of writing, and take the form of personal experience or opinion, or explore the work of others who have contributed to the field. Articles in the first issue of this volume include: "It's a Frame-Up: Helping Students Devise Beginnings and Endings" (Romana Hillebrand); "Back to Square One: What To Do When Writing Workshop Just Doesn't Work" (Glorianne Bradshaw); "Experiments in Reading and Writing: The New York City Writing Project at Work" (Nancy Wilson); "Listening to College Writers" (Anne-Marie Harvey); and "Promoting Social Imagination through Interior Monologues" (Linda Christensen with Bill Bigelow). Articles in the second issue include: "Works in Progress: First-Year College Students after EN101" (Helen Collins Sitler); "Author to Author: How Text Influences Young Writers" (Dina Sechio DeCristofaro); "Everything I Know about Teaching Language Arts I Learned at the Office Supply Store" (Kathleen O'Shaughnessy); "Using Favorite Songs as Prompts" (Michael Fulton); "Lessons from Tony: Betrayal and Trust in Teacher Research" (Sharon K. Miller); and "The Writing Process Rejected" (Orlean R. Anderson). Articles in the third issue include: "Tensing up: Moving from Fluency to Flair" (Suzanne Linebarger); "We All Have 'Lots of Yesterdays': How Creative Nonfiction Enlivens the Secondary Writing Classroom" (Meredith Eastburn with an Introduction by Dave Winter); "Working with Beginning Writers" (Alisa Daniel); "'Let's Talk': Building a Bridge between Home and School" (Catherine Humphrey); "A Voice That Is Heard: Living the Writing Project Philosophy as Coaches" (Sidnie Myrick); and "Episodic Fiction: Another Way To Tell a Story" (Pen Campbell and Dan Holt). Articles in the fourth issue of this volume include: "Stories and the Teaching Life" (Tim Gillespie); "Teaching Mining; Mining Teaching" (Peggy Riley); "Matching Reading Models and Strategies" (Mary Frances Landenwich); "Portfolios That Make a Difference: A Four-Year Journey" (Judith Ruhana); "A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop" (Erin Ciccone); "Beyond Rhetoric: A Reflective, Persuasive Final Exam for the Workshop Classroom" (Sarah Lorenz); and "How To Build Better Engineers: A Practical Approach to the Mechanics of Text" (Ron E. Smelser). (RS)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 461 889

The Quarterly of the National Writing Project, 2001

v23 n1-4

Editors:

Amy Bauman
Art Peterson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

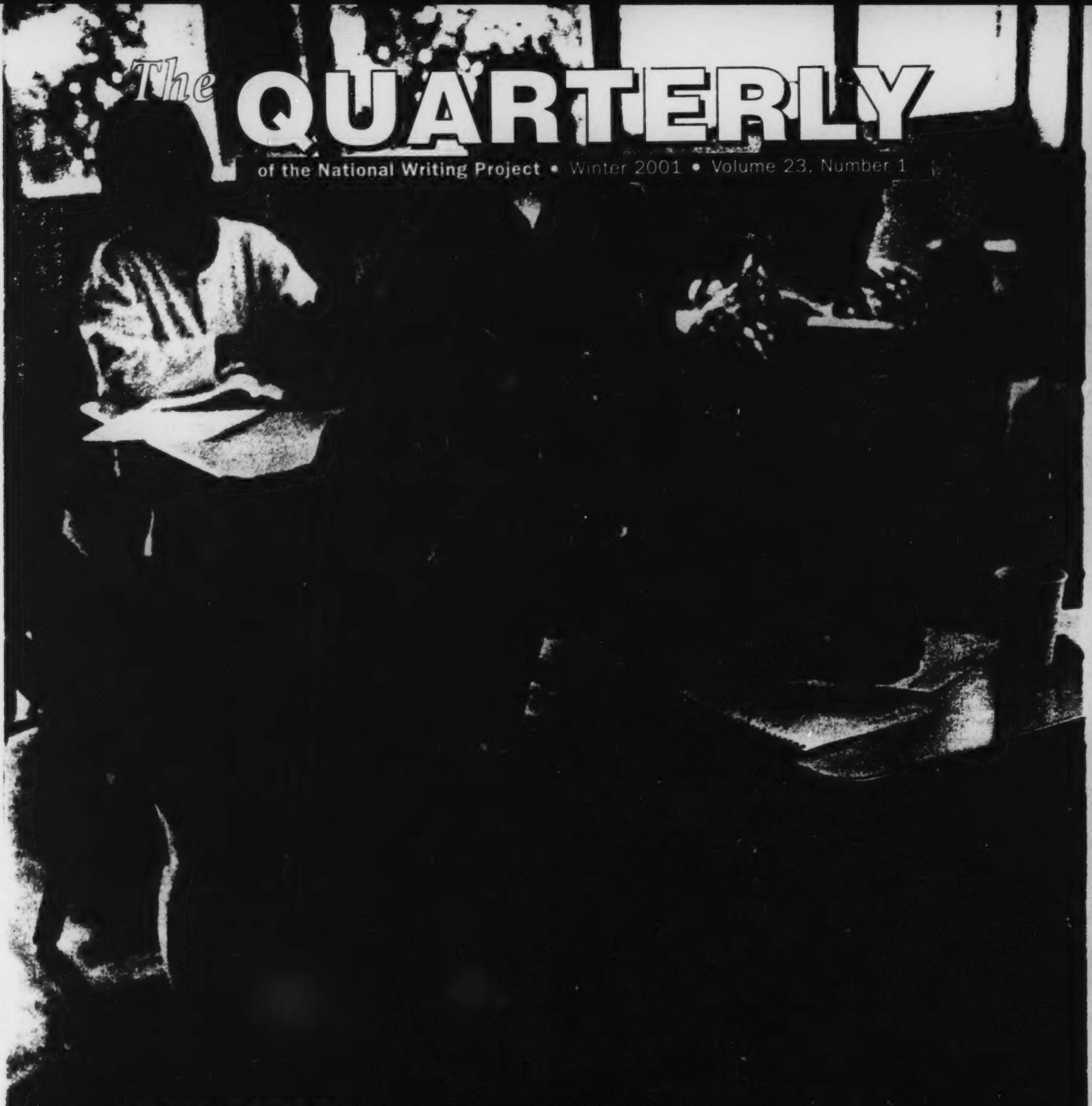
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M.A. Smith
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
2A

CS217847

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Winter 2001 • Volume 23, Number 1



IN THIS ISSUE:

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

- What To Do When Writing Workshop Just Doesn't Work
- Experiments in Reading and Writing

HEARING STUDENT VOICES

- Reading, Writing, and Rising Up
- Listening to College Writers
- Saving a Seat for Joseph

CS 217 847

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Winter 2001 • Volume 23, Number 1

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

It's a Frame-Up
Helping Students Devise Beginnings and Endings 2
ROMANA HILLEBRAND

How Reading Poetry Will Get You a Six-Figure Job 5
BRITTON GILDERSLEEVE

Back to Square One
What To Do When Writing Workshop Just Doesn't Work 7
GLORIANNE BRADSHAW

Experiments in Reading and Writing
The New York City Writing Project at Work 13
NANCY WILSON

HEARING STUDENT VOICES

Listening to College Writers 19
ANNE-MARIE HARVEY

Unloading the Excess Baggage
A Teacher's Story 26
BETH HALBERT

Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues 28
LINDA CHRISTENSEN WITH BILL BIGELOW

Saving a Seat for Joseph 32
MARIA RUSSELL

EDITORS' NOTEBOOK

Where Is the Truth in Virtual Reality? 34
ROXANNE BARBER

LETTERS 36

BOOKS

Winning Ways of Coaching Writing
A Practical Guide for Teaching Writing, Grades 6–12 38
BY MARY L. WARNER
REVIEWED BY JIM ADDISON

Image Grammar
Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing 40
BY HARRY NODEN
REVIEWED BY BOB INGALLS

Cover photo by Elizabeth Crews

Correction: The cover photo of the Fall 2000 issue of The Quarterly *was inadvertently attributed to Elizabeth Crews. Photo credit should have gone to Kathy Sloane. That issue also featured several photos (pp. 18–20) from the project's early days, taken by Ken Lane.*

It's a Frame Up

Helping Students Devise Beginnings and Endings

ROMANA HILLEBRAND

A carefully crafted frame can make satisfying metaphorical connections for both reader and writer, giving the paper a deeper sense of meaning and a way into and out of the assignment that escapes the traditional pattern and quandary of old hat.

Oftentimes, getting an essay started and getting it concluded can trouble my college sophomores and juniors more than finding something to say in between. They can always rely, of course, on the old standbys: the traditional introduction and the traditional conclusion to the traditional essay, telling the audience what will be said and concluding with what has been said. Granted, this approach works well in speeches or with lengthy writings, but in shorter essays, these crusty techniques come off as predictable and boring.

What Is a Framing Device?

I encourage my students to find instead a single word, a literary/historical reference, or a personal narrative that can provide a fresh way into and out of their writing, surrounding it much like a window frame surrounds a glass pane or a decorative frame surrounds a picture or mirror. Just as the right picture frame becomes one with the painting, the right rhetorical frame becomes one with the composition, enhancing as well as complementing. This frame not only starts and concludes the writing, but can also reinforce the main idea, offer a broader perspective, or even interject a bit of humor. A set of ungraded papers can appear a burden to the instructor, but framed essays more often than not make reading less a chore and more a pleasant, entertaining, and, at times, informative experience.

Last year, a student in my research class wrote a lengthy paper on the relationship between humans and plants, beginning her rather serious topic with a reference to a well-known nursery rhyme: "Ring around the roses, a pocket full of posies . . . ." She explains that the pocket full of flowers masked the stench of death during the time of the black plague, only one of the many useful purposes of plants that have benefited us throughout the ages. The paper ends with a reinforcement of the warning that we depend on plant life to add quality to our own lives: "Without plants, life on Earth would cease to exist as we know it: 'ashes, ashes, we all fall down.'"

On a much different note, a student in my rhetorical conventions class wrote a short paper that manipulates his memories of a particular odor into a framing device. Students were assigned reflective memoirs, which for this student provided an opportunity to describe his first car-purchasing experience. He opens the piece by detailing the musty smell of the used car and the "Blue Bouquet" air freshener that made it his. He ends with a description of his strongest memory: "Regardless of where I am or what I am doing, whenever I smell the scent of a Blue Bouquet air freshener, I can hear the rumble of the exhaust behind me, feel the air rustling my hair, and sense the urge to slam the pedal to the floor so I can feel the sheer bone-crunching power of acceleration."

A good place to find rhetorical frames commonly used by professional writers is in newspapers that run feature articles and columnists. In 1985, flying home after a trip to Mexico, I sat next to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith. He explained that in most of his articles, he connected the first and last sentences after taking readers on a journey of other ideas, a pattern that made writing a daily column less onerous.

The Single-Word, Single-Image Frame

Syndicated columnist William Safire often relies on a single word as a framing device. In a 1994 article, he calls on *tsunami*, the Japanese word for a "great wave caused by underwater seismic shock," to frame an article on the shock that caused the conservative wave of that year. His introduction connects the definition of tsunami with the main idea of his article: the majority of voters "shook up" legislators to express their lack of faith in an ever-growing government. The column ends with a second mention of the tsunami, identifying it as a shock that does indeed change everything and that leads to exciting days politically, an analogy that reinforces his (but not everyone's) opinion.

> *A writer can seduce a reader into considering relatively abstract ideas by creating a framing device that links these ideas to everyday images and experiences.*

A writer can seduce a reader into considering relatively abstract ideas by creating a framing device that links these ideas to everyday images and experiences. In another column, Safire decries the "new disloyalty" that seemingly affects our culture at every level of business and politics. He has his teeth into a large concept, but he introduces his thoughts about a fickle public, fickle corporate world, and fickle government by making a down-to-earth confession: Over the years, Safire says, he has been a toothpaste hopper. He writes that the avuncular tones of Harry Von Zell got him to switch to long-forgotten Ipana from even more forgotten Kolynos. Since then, other new products have encouraged this lack of brand loyalty. Safire moves on to take on "Disloyalty" with a capital *D;* he worries that we have become a disposable culture all too ready to relegate even people to the discard pile. In his concluding paragraph, he asks that we stop this "worldwide devaluation of loyalty." He ends, however, with a mundane image echoing his opening. "Pick a brand of toothpaste and stick with it." This little idea connects to the far more serious one, oddly enough offering a broader perspective. The smallness of his framing device may seem incongruous, but this very element awakens us to the exigency of our everyday actions.

Allusions as Framing Devices

Literary references also make effective framing devices. In our local newspaper, a letter to the editor from an angry professor responds to an editorial in which the editorial writer is accusing the university teachers of "salary whining." The professor puts to work Edgar Allen Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" as a literary framing device, quoting Poe's opening sentence as his opening sentence: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge." The writer uses the words of Poe's narrator to convey his own indignation at being flagrantly wronged. The body of the letter details the professor's resentment at what he considers to be the editorial writer's insults, but the final sentence refers again to Poe's story: "Ah, for a fresh batch of cement, a stack of bricks, and a good trowel," the very tools, readers of Poe will recognize, that the story's narrator uses to work his revenge on Fortunato. By humorously framing hostile feelings, the professor gently emphasizes his point: Overworked and underpaid, he and his colleagues do not appreciate editorials claiming otherwise.

Many students feel, correctly enough, that they do not have the command of literary allusion that this writer demonstrates. However, almost all have an intimate knowledge of some folk and fairy tales that may serve them as they create framing devices. One student, writing about her struggle with obesity, puts to use the question that opens *Snow White:* "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The student quickly explains that, in her world, "fairest" is changed to "fattest." She further connects the device by describing her despair each time she stands before that cruel mirror. After revealing her struggle and her growing awareness of others who, for various reasons, do not "fit in," the paper ends with a new version of the mirror question: "Who is the healthiest of them all?" While the framing device gives an added dimension of poignancy to the narrative, the newly recast, final question concludes it on an uplifting note.

Personal Experience as a Framing Device

Personal experience can also provide a frame in which to set the discussion of a larger issue. *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman provides a personal experience to frame an opinion piece calling for labels in clothing to guarantee consumers that child labor has not produced newly purchased garments. Standing at a checkout counter, she looks at the various tags and labels affixed to a pair of shorts she has decided to purchase. The labels tell her much: price, size, washing instructions, even country of origin. Left unasked is the question "Who has produced this pair of tennis shorts?" As she ponders the origin of these shorts, she creates a transition from the frame to the article's purpose—asking consumers to make a connection "between what we wear and the people who make it." Goodman concludes her argument by referring once again to her own purchase, calling herself an "uneasy consumer of one pair of tennis shorts who would like to initiate change by asking one simple question: How about labels for labor?"

Students often use personal experience narratives similar to Goodman's as a way into and out of papers on such topics as racism, the environment, or political and school concerns. By calling on an incident or event from his or her life, the writer adds an extra dimension to the topic as well as an authenticity. When the concluding sentence refers to this opening experience, the reader is left with a satisfying sense of closure. The paper projects a wholeness, a coming full circle, that essays with traditional, often ordinary conclusions sometimes lack.

In a particularly effective paper on the negative impact television violence can have on children, one of my students begins with a description of his family's extended Thanksgiving dinner. The student explains that the peacefulness he felt as the family members gathered to give thanks for all their blessings vanished once he entered the family room where his younger cousins were mobilized in front of the television for the *Power Rangers* program. After watching intensely physical confrontations, the normally docile three- to twelve-year-olds turned into "miniature fighting machines." They eagerly kicked and punched any interloper, forcing the narrator to leave and causing him to seriously question the laissez faire child-rearing attitudes of the children's parents. This incident acts as a segue that connects the family experience with his topic: the growing problem of children's viewing of television violence and possible solutions to this problem. The writer concludes by offering a plan for handling the situation at the next Thanksgiving dinner: "I may not be the most popular cousin for turning off the *Power Rangers*, but what is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular. I can live with not being popular."

For many students, the personal experience that becomes the framing device for an essay triggers the piece's central idea, rather than the other way around. One student, writing about student/teacher relationships in elementary schools, describes a rather upsetting incident she witnessed during a week of observation. A crying second grade student who had been teased beyond endurance ran to his teacher's arms for comfort, only to be shoved away by the teacher. This observation begins the student's essay and inspires the central idea of the piece: when teachers touch students, they have reason to fear the consequences. The paper ends with the writer once again referring to the incident of the spurned second-grader. She mentions how troubled she was at the time, but after doing research on the subject, she explains, "I clearly understand her reasons for not offering comfort and for not hugging him back."

Some Framing Traps

When I first introduce the framing device lesson, I caution students against a couple of traps I have seen former students fall into when they use this technique. Sometimes a framing device can take on a life of its own, becoming more developed than the content. This I call the "runaway frame." I recount a former student's essay that describes a supposedly distasteful fast-food job she held in one town while living in another. For her introduction and conclusion, she gives a hair-raising account of her forty-minute commute to work over black ice. Although the purpose of her paper was to dissuade readers from taking a position at the particular restaurant where she worked, the overly long framing device was far more compelling. No reader would want to live down that hill after reading about the slippery road, the traffic, the delays, and the danger.

There's another trap that students fall into. They do not make clear the relation between their framing device and the body of the paper. One student began and ended a paper on the Cuban missile crisis with quotes from Hamlet. "To be or not to be," the paper begins, ending with the lines, "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them . . . ." One may imagine many connections between these words from Shakespeare and the events of the Cuban missile crisis, but the writer did not articulate any of them. As we help students revise, we need to be on the lookout for these connections that have not yet made it from the student's mind to his paper.

Keeping these caveats in mind, however, a carefully crafted frame can make satisfying metaphorical connections for both reader and writer, giving the paper a deeper sense of meaning and a way into and out of the assignment that escapes the traditional pattern and quandary of old hat.

Romana Hillebrand currently teaches writing at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. She is a board member of the Northwest Inland Writing Project at the University of Idaho.

How Reading Poetry Will Help You Get a Six-Figure Job

Britton Gildersleeve

The main problem with teaching poetry to non–English majors is that too often we have to justify our position. . . . This short exercise is one I've used with resounding success on skeptical high school and college students.

This exercise will be most effective if you pretend you're one of your students while you read it. Look at the advertisement (see Figure 1) and see if you can answer the questions asked.

The main problem with teaching poetry to non–English majors is that too often we have to justify our position, as in "What's so great about poetry that it should take up class time better devoted to writing essays?" This short exercise is one I've used with resounding success on skeptical high school and college students. It also worked on my engineer husband.

The accompanying job classified was on Williams Communications' home page in late March 2000. While the salary is not specified, let your students know it was in excess of $100,000. The same job was listed elsewhere with salary range specified.

I place the copy of the ad on an overhead projector and ask the students to follow with me as I read it aloud—a few of my students would have had a hard time with some of the technical jargon. After I answer any questions about vocabulary, I ask them what the job is asking for.

"What skills," I ask, "do you need to get an interview for this job?"

They respond "technical skills," "leadership," "computer stuff," and the list continues, covering everything from good problem-solving techniques to "effective communication."

"And what," I counter, "do things like computer skills and technical skills have to do with English?" This stumps them. They ponder a bit and then change gears.

"It must be the communication," they tell me. But I'm shaking my head. "Well, then, how about 'exceptional written and oral skills?'"

"None of you," I tell them, "would even get an interview for this job."

Different classes handle this answer in different ways. Confident classes—usually literature classes—go on to look more closely at the ad. Freshman composition classes tend to look pitifully overwhelmed until I relent.

"Let's find the most important sentence in this ad," I suggest. Good students all, they expect the "thesis" to be in the first paragraph. When I tell them it's not, they're appalled. This allows a brief—but significant—digression on audience expectations, and form/genre constraints. There are good reasons, I point out, why I ask them to place their explicit theses in their introductions (for the most part; there are also good reasons to break rules).

With prodding and a discussion of "critical reading skills," students locate the "most important sentence," actually two:

> *Must be a strong leader able to manage cross-functional teams toward a common goal of problem resolution and process improvement. Problem resolution efforts will often involve teams with dissimilar goals and priorities and the need to manage them toward a common goal and gain*

the support of their disparate management organizations.

What, I ask my students, does this mean? And why do I say it's so important? By this time, my better critical readers are catching on.

"They want someone who can manage folks who don't get along," Clinton says.

Yes, I tell the class. They want someone who can manage a group of several smaller groups, working at cross-purposes ("cross-functional"); teams with "dissimilar goals," whose individual managers sound as if they aren't very supportive at the moment.

How do we know this, I ask the kids. Are we correct in reading the ad this way? What clues does the actual text give us?

What follows is often the liveliest discussion of the early weeks. Suddenly, students understand how these apparently esoteric skills apply to the real world. They see why it's necessary to return to the actual text to prove a point. This is easier when I ask if we could make a case for the ad asking for physical labor.

"That's nowhere in there," they exclaim in disgust.

"So," I reply, "the text itself will, to an extent, *help* you read it? You can't just make up something?" (A problem with some of my more "creative" readers.)

"No," they agree, "there are limits to reality, even when meaning isn't immediately obvious."

I point out that few—if any—of their other classes will ask them to read in this way. Economics and biology and chemistry and the much-vaunted "technological" skills courses will not teach them to read for more than "facts." You don't have to be able to read for "clues" to solve for x, nor does Microsoft require you to dig deeper than a fairly straightforward owner's manual.

Finally, I ask them if they understand, now, why I say that poetry is the most important subject in school. This (usually) brings a round of loud laughter, and then the sobering realization that I'm only half kidding.

In a time when few of our students read poetry on their own, when schools have less and less time to devote to what may often seem like overly intellectual pursuits, many of my students tell me that they had no poetry in school at all and have read none outside of class. Nor do they understand why, at the college level, freshman composition is mandated. This, I tell them, should convince them that only in an English class—or in a class with someone who emphasizes critical reading—will they learn the skills that will help them establish themselves in the lifestyle to which they aspire. As for the spiritual enrichment poetry brings—that's another exercise!

BRITTON GILDERSLEEVE is co-director of the Oklahoma State University Writing Project. She teaches English and composition at OSU.

Reprinted with permission from the October 2000 issue of Writers & Projects of the Oklahoma State University Writing Project.

Expertise:	Information Systems Technology
Education:	Bachelors
Job Type:	Full-Time
Location:	Tulsa, OK
Compensation:	Commensurate with Experience
Start Date:	Immediate

Provide technical support and assistance to both Williams internal application systems users and external customers/partners. Develop familiarity with business, application, and technical processes and use this understanding to improve the processing and accuracy of the data and the performance of the interfaces between internal systems and external customers. Lead efforts to resolve issues across business, application support, and technical support groups seeking the best solution to problems that arise in the process, performance, or accuracy of application systems and the data exchanged between internal and external systems and customers. Problem resolution efforts will often include direct interaction with external customers. Must be a strong leader able to manage cross-functional teams toward a common goal of problem resolution and process improvement. Problem resolution efforts will often involve teams with dissimilar goals and priorities and the need to manage them toward a common goal and gain the support of their disparate management organizations. Must possess exceptional written and oral skills. A good existing understanding of business, application, and technical areas is required and/or the ability to seek out and assimilate information independently and quickly. Must be able to work with little supervision and manage time effectively. Knowledge and experience acquired through this position will serve as excellent preparation for movement into advanced leadership positions within Williams Communications. Bachelors degree or equivalent experience.

Figure 1. The classified advertisement that prompted Gildersleeve's exercise on poetry for non-English majors.

Back to Square One

What to Do When Writing Workshop Just Doesn't Work

Glorianne Bradshaw

The assumption that jump-starts writing workshop is that students have things they want to write about. Not these children. This was the worst case of first grade writer's block that I have seen in over twenty years of teaching. And it lasted all year.

Until I encountered the Class That Would Not Write, writing workshop had been my favorite time of the school day. Even though my students were first graders and at an age some would consider too young for this kind of activity, we were involved in all the elements of writing workshop. My students wrote what they wanted to write, I gave them mini-lessons, and we conferenced. They published, and by the end of the year, they were writing much longer stories than they had been at the beginning.

Then came the Class That Would Not Write. These children had much to recommend them. In some ways, these students were, in fact, the class from heaven. They sat in their desks performing all their tasks without question. In the morning, they came into the room smiling, and at the end of the day, they greeted those who met them with hugs and "guess-what-happened-todays."

Most of these students knew most of their letter names and some of their letter sounds. Some could spell their names and maybe "mom" or "dad" or "cat" or "dog." But as a group, they had one big problem: they had absolutely no writing ideas — at least none that I could drag from them. The assumption that jump-starts writing workshop is that students have things they want to write about. Not these children. This was the worst case of first grade writer's block that I have seen in over twenty years of teaching. And it lasted all year.

"What should I write?"
"What should I write next?"
"I don't know what to write."

"Write about your pet snake? You know a lot about him."

"Okay, what should I write about him?"

But I wasn't ready to give up on these students. In fact, we eventually published books for all the world to see. The students beamed with pride. I was proud, too, as I should have been, for I had written these tomes myself. No, I hadn't actually put the words to paper for the children, but all the ideas in the book were mine.

So what do you do when writing workshop doesn't work? If I had been in my beginning years of teaching, I might have abandoned writing workshop, but I had fond memories of workshops that had worked, and I was determined to make writing workshop work again.

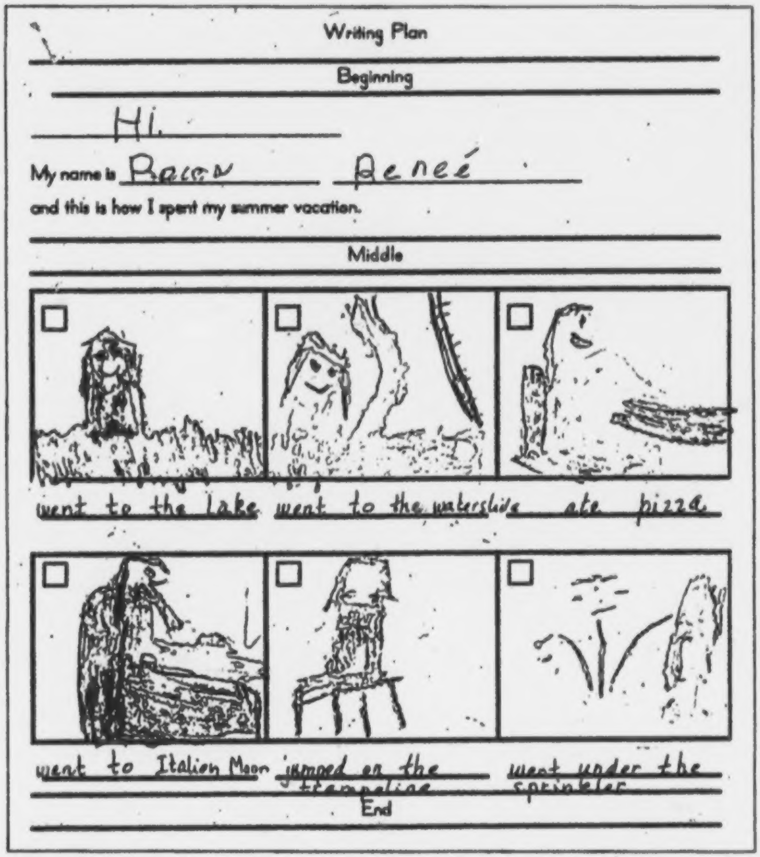
Over the summer, I had time to rethink writing workshop for first grade. I began to wonder what would happen if I put more of the responsibility for writing direction on me. Many of these children seemed to need more guidance than I was giving them. But then, for most people, writing—like other skills—doesn't just happen. It's my guess that long before Julia Child mastered the art of French cooking, someone taught her how to fry an egg. Likewise, a beginning writer might need more structure than I was providing.

Clifford to the Rescue

Summer is my time to restore order to my collection of trade books that I tote from home to school and back again each year. I was putting all the Norman Bridwell *Clifford* books together on a shelf when the idea occurred to me. Norman Bridwell has probably sold millions of these books. They speak to young children in a way I had not been able to speak to the Class That Would Not Write. Maybe I could just borrow a few of his techniques, such as his predictable beginning sentence: "Hi, I'm Emily Elizabeth, and this is Clifford, my big red dog." (From the book *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*, by Norman Bridwell.)

And maybe, at the beginning of the writing workshop each day, I could read a *Clifford* book or two to the students. Maybe three. I'd use a stuffed Clifford dog to guard the writing workshop folders, and *Clifford* books could be placed around the room inviting readers. Soon, I began making lesson plans …

And that's how it all began; that's how I came to rethink writing workshop. In this article, I am going to describe with exactness some of the dialogue that went on between me and my students as we worked our way through this "guided" writing workshop. My purpose is to demonstrate that, sometimes, for students to learn, we have to begin by taking small steps.



Writing Plan

Beginning

Hi.

My name is Becca Reneé

and this is how I spent my summer vacation.

Middle

☐ went to the lake

☐ went to the waterslide

☐ ate pizza

☐ went to Italian Moon

☐ jumped on the trampoline

☐ went under the sprinkler

End

Figure 1. Becca's writing plan. The six squares illustrate how she spent her summer vacation and are followed by verb phrases: "went to the lake," "went to the waterslide," "ate pizza," "went to Italian Moon," "jumped on the trampoline," "went under the sprinkler."

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The Beginning

> *"Hi, (or hello or howdy, hola, etc.) my name is (first name) (middle name), and this is how I spent my summer vacation."*

Perfect. Every child has an awesome beginning sentence. You may think I am taking a step backward by suggesting that my students write a summer vacation story. This is, after all, not a new writing topic. However, these are first graders; it's new to them.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The Middle

A picture is worth a thousand words. Let's start there and condense.

Each student begins working on a writing plan. In each of six squares, they draw a sketch of themselves doing some summer activity. One square per child each day takes about twenty minutes. I need to work with each student individually during this time to write a verb phrase under each sketch. The first three or four squares are easy for them to sketch, but most of them did only three or four things all summer. For the last two squares, I offer some writing prompts, asking questions like these: What did you do on a rainy day? What did you do in the evening? What did you do when your friends were not around?

I go around to each student and ask, "What did you do?" I want a response in the past tense. I then write the verb phrase on the line below the square. For example, if the child says, "I rode my bike," I say "rode my bike" and write it on the line. I point to each

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

word and read the phrase and then ask the child to read it with me. When all six squares are completed, it is time to write sentences. (See Figure 1 for an example of Becca's writing plan.)

Modeling

On an overhead transparency, I show a writing plan on which I have drawn a sketch of me stirring something. I tell the children I made cookies on my vacation. I write the phrase "made cookies" under the sketch. I show them the sentence worksheet I will be writing my sentence on, and I put a sentence worksheet on the overhead. I ask them to help me write my sentence and tell them that if they help me write my sentence, I will help them write their sentences. They readily agree.

> *Writing workshop is still my favorite part of the school day, thanks to the Class That Would Not Write. Because of these students, I was forced to rethink the workshop for first grade.*

I read the words on the sentence sheet: *who, what, where, when,* and *tell me more.* I don't use the word *why* because the response is usually "because" or "I don't know." We are ready to write a sentence.

"Who is in this sketch?" I ask.

"*That's you.*"

"Yes. That's me."

In the space under the word *who* I write "me."

"Do you remember what I did?"

"*You made cookies.*"

I copy the words "made cookies" under the word *what,* and I have the children read the words with me as I point to them.

"Where do you think I would be making cookies?"

"*In the kitchen. In your house.*"

"Yes. I am in the kitchen of my house."

I write the words "in the kitchen" under the word *where.* We read the phrase as I point to the words.

The next word is *when.* Since they would not know when I made the cookies, I say I made them in the morning. I write in the words "in the morning." We read the phrase.

A Little Editing

I read the entire sentence to the children.

"Me . . . made cookies . . . in the kitchen . . . in the morning."

Laughter.

"Did that sentence sound silly?" I ask and then agree. "It sounded a little bit like the Cookie Monster talking. How do you think I could change this sentence so I won't be talking like the Cookie Monster?"

"*You could say* I *made cookies in the kitchen.*"

"That would sound better to me."

I cross out "me" and put in "I." I point and read again and ask them to read it with me. On this day, I do not do the **Tell-Me-More** part, or the lesson would be too long.

Back to Square One

Now it is time for the children to begin writing their sentences.

"Look at your sketch in the first square," I say. "Who is in your sketch?"

They write "I" in the **Who** space on their worksheets (see Figure 2). If they have more than one person in the sketch, I help them spell the other person's name and tell them that authors are polite and write the other person's name first.

"What did you do?"

They copy in the verb phrase from the **What** space.

"Where were you?"

"At the park."
"At the pool."
"In my house."
"On the road."

I write these responses on the board in list form. Often, several children give the same response; when this happens, I point out the response, and they can copy it. They write their responses in the **Where** space.

"When did you do this?"

"In the morning."
"At night."
"At 3:00."

Again, I write the responses on the board. They write their words in the **When** space.

"You have just written a whole sentence," I say to them. "Put a period after the last word." I then show them how to make a period.

Then I ask for volunteers to read their sentences. This workshop may take longer than the usual twenty minutes.

Tell Me More

The children have their writing plan pages and sentences from their writing folders. I tell them that I have looked at their sentences and I would like to know more. Now I am working on the overhead transparency for the sentence writing. I read the sentence

I made yesterday: "I made cookies in the kitchen in the morning."

"Do you want to know more?"

"I want to know what kind of cookies you made."
"Were the cookies good?"
"Who ate the cookies?"

"I think I will tell you what kind of cookies I made. I made chocolate-chip cookies. Will you help me write that sentence?"

"We don't know how to write that."

Spelling may be a problem for first grade writers. They may know how to ask, "How do you spell *dog*?" but when you tell them the first letter is a "d," the next question may be, "How do you make a *D*?"

"I think we can write it together. If you help me write my sentence, then I will help you write your sentences. Say the sentence after me: I made chocolate-chip cookies."

"I made chocolate-chip cookies."

"How many words do you hear?"

I say the words slowly and count them on my fingers: "Five words." I make five lines on the board, saying the words slowly as I make the lines.

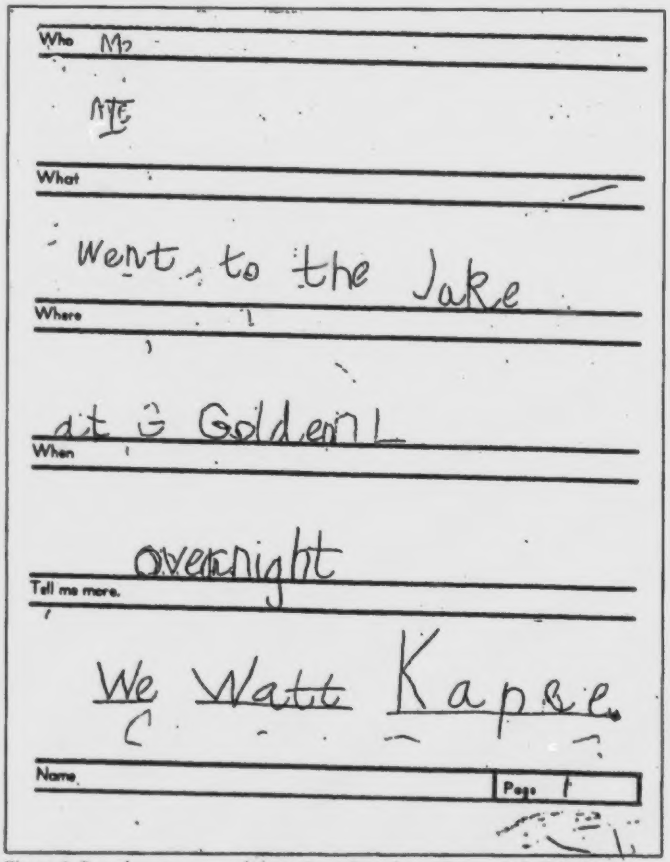
__ ___ ________ ___ ________.

I ask the children to read the sentence with me.

"There aren't any words."

"You're right. I'll try it without words first, and then you can help me put some words on the lines."

I "read the words," pointing to the lines as I read.



Who M?

ME I

What

went to the Jake

Where

at Golden L

When

overnight

Tell me more.

We Watt Kapee.

Name

Page 1

Figure 2. Becca's sentence worksheet. From her phrase "went to the lake," Becca developed the sentences, "I went to the lake at Golden overnight. We went camping."

"Why do you think some of the lines are longer?"

"For long words?"

"You're right. I need longer lines for longer words. I can spell 'I' because it is on the word wall."

I write "I" on the first line and ask them to help me spell *made*. "What sounds is your mouth making?" I ask and then slowly sound out the word *m-a-d-e*.

"What is the first sound your mouth makes?"

"mmm . . . M?"

I put an *m* at the beginning of the second line.

"What do you hear next?"

"mmm . . . aa.a . . . A?"

I put an *a* after the *m*.

"What do you hear at the end?"

"mmm . . . aaa . . . d . . . D?"

"Yes. D."

I put a *d* at the end of the line.

"Let's go to the next line." I repeat I made ________ ____ ______.

First-graders will probably not know that the "ch" sound is made with the letters *ch*, so I just tell them. They sound out the rest and come up with *k*, *l*, and *t*. So *chklt* goes on the next line.

"Help me with *chip*."

"It begins with c-h *just like chocolate."*

"Good thinking. Do you hear any other sounds?"

They respond with a *p* at the end. *Chip* is spelled "chp." *Cookies* is spelled "k e s."

I mention that all the lines are filled, so we can put a period at the end. We read the sentence together.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I help them individually as they need help writing their sentences and encourage them to give it a try. They may use inventive spelling by sounding out the word.

If you are a first grade teacher, you know that when you tell someone that you teach first grade, they will almost always say, "You must have a lot of patience." The **Tell-Me-More** sentences will try that patience but are well worth the effort.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: The End

Clifford to the rescue again. We will borrow an ending sentence from the book *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*: "'So,' I said to Martha, 'that's how I got my dog. Tell me again how you got your dog.'"

"So, I said to my friend

________ ______,

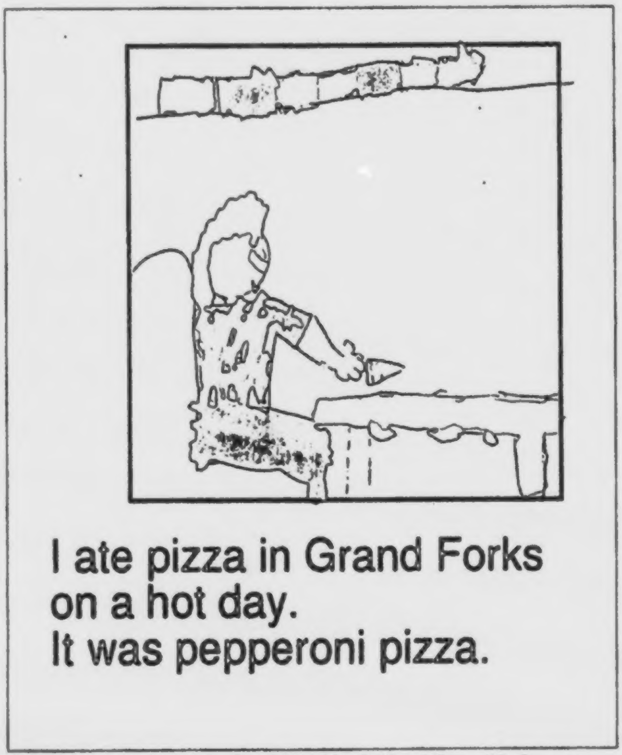
that's how I spent my summer vacation. Tell me about yours."

Each student draws a classmate's name out of the hat to fill in the blank; everyone in class will have a friend, and everyone will be a friend. That helps build a reading/writing community in the classroom.

Publishing

Because I want these books to become reading materials for reading workshop and because I know how much the children have given mentally and physically to this project, I like to publish the books. Each book takes about forty-five minutes to keyboard and prepare for binding. I teach in a small school and usually have only ten to twelve students. When I have eighteen or more, I publish fewer books per child.

After I have completed the keyboarding and formatting, the books are ready to illustrate. I have students illustrate only one page each day. Some would like to illustrate their whole book in one day so they could take it home to share with their families, but I want them to take their time. We talk about how the illustrations must go with the words and have a lesson on how to draw a person. (If you draw the head first and add a neck, stick people are unlikely.)



I ate pizza in Grand Forks
on a hot day.
It was pepperoni pizza.

Figure 3. Page 4 from Becca's published book, How I Spent My Summer Vacation.

When the books have been illustrated, they are ready to be bound. I have the children bring a photograph from home that was taken in the past summer. I copy each child's photo on a color copier and use it on the front cover of his or her book. I include a dedication page, the illustrated pages, a page giving credit to Norman Bridwell, a page with the place and date of publication, and a page for readers to compliment the author. The back cover includes a photograph of the author and a little information about him or her. Here is an example:

Becca is a 1999 Valley Kindergarten graduate. She is currently enrolled in the first grade at Valley. When Becca is not in school, she likes to ride her bike and play outdoors.

I laminate the covers of the book and bind them with a comb binder. The children may take the books home to share with their families for a few days. Figures 3 and 4 show two pages from Becca's book.

I keep the rough drafts in their writing portfolios in order to chart progress throughout the year. I also keep dated samples of writing that was done on their own.

The Celebration

The children practice their books until they feel ready to read them in front of the class.

Until the end of the school year, these books can be read for reading workshop as self-selected books. The student-written books are all different but similar enough to be easily read by peers. It is beneficial to have the author in the same room to help with words. The books are recorded on their reading cards with the same respect paid to authors such as Norman Bridwell, Mem Fox, and Bill Martin, Jr.

We call the book patterned after Norman Bridwell's *Clifford* books an autobiography. The students also write a biography patterned after Mercer Mayers's *Just Me* books, a book patterned after Sue William's *I Went Walking*, a research paper patterned after Margaret Wise Brown's *The Important Book*, an historical fiction patterned after Mem Fox's *Tough Boris*, and a tale patterned after a popular fairy tale.

Writing workshop is not the only time that the children write during the day, and I have found that my structured writing workshop lessons have aided students in performing the other writing they are called on to do. They write on their own and during reading workshop to be assessed or to respond to literature, during math workshop in journals and for problem solving, during science lab to record experiments, and during social studies in a travelogue. They also write notes home and thank-you notes.

Writing workshop is still my favorite part of the school day, thanks to the Class That Would Not Write. Because of these students, I was forced to rethink the workshop for first grade. Now I believe that rather than taking away creativity by giving the students a topic, I am instead introducing them to other writing workshop elements such as inventive spelling, mini-lessons, modeling, and editing. The students are still learning to generate and write their own ideas; I have simply given them a format for writing creatively.

References

Bridwell, Norman. 1972. *Clifford the Small Red Puppy*. New York: Scholastic Inc.

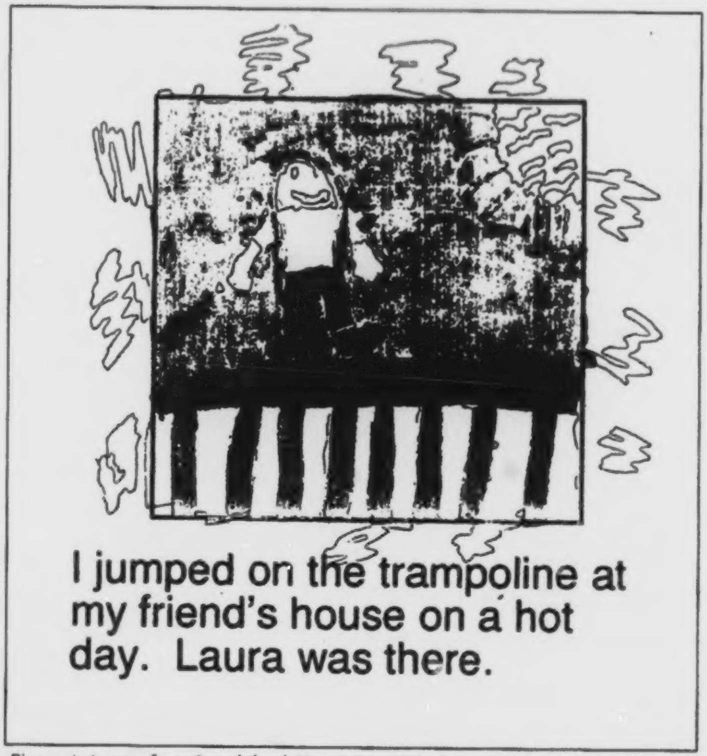
Brown, Margaret Wise. 1949. *The Important Book*. USA: Harper & Row.

Fletcher, Ralph, and Joann Portalupi. 1998. *Craft Lessons*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Fox, Mem. 1994. *Tough Boris*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Mayer, Mercer. 1988. *Just My Friend and Me*. New York. Golden Books Publishing Company.

Williams, Sue. 1989. *I Went Walking*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



I jumped on the trampoline at my friend's house on a hot day. Laura was there.

Figure 4. A page from Becca's book How I Spent My Summer Vacation.

Glorianne Bradshaw teaches first grade in Crystal, North Dakota. She is a 1999 fellow of the Red River Valley Writing Project at the University of North Dakota.

Experiments in Reading and Writing

The New York City Writing Project at Work

NANCY WILSON

I knew there were no miracles. I'd seen teachers coax and cajole students to read the texts in front of them, seen them lift students' heads off desks and put pens into their hands. And yet, I'd seen classroom after classroom in which students and teachers were reading.

The following chapter has been excerpted from Nancy Wilson's monograph A Professional Community at Work: The New York City Writing Project at Theodore Roosevelt High School. *This monograph documents a five-year collaboration between the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP, a program of the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College/CUNY) and an overcrowded, inner-city high school in the Bronx.*

The collaboration is part of NYCWP's school-based program. This program was set in place in 1981 by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and continues today through the support of public and private funders, including Lehman College. The key to this model is the on-site teacher-consultant, who is typically a New York City school teacher released to the program by arrangement with the New York City Board of Education. In this position, the consultant co-leads the after-school seminar, provides assistance to teachers, and meets regularly with administrators. Currently, NYCWP has fourteen such consultants working in schools in all five boroughs of the city.

In 1998, NYCWP asked Nancy Wilson, a writer, researcher, and NYCWP teacher-consultant, to document the collaboration between the writing project and Theodore Roosevelt High School. The result of her work is this monograph. While the heart of this piece chronicles the work of on-site teacher-consultant Ronni Tobman-Michelen, Wilson's words also honor the teachers and administrators of Roosevelt High as well as the writing project's approach to professional development.

—The Editors

As time passed, the success of specific NYCWP approaches, coupled with frequent opportunities for discussions of practice, encouraged many teachers at Roosevelt to experiment. Several began with theme-based classroom projects that integrated reading and writing in a number of ways.

Melanie's "Journey"

Melanie Pigeon, for example, created "Journey into the Nature of Solitude," an exploration of solitude that drew on literature and supported the reading and writing of her eleventh grade students. "I chose this theme," she wrote in her report on the project,

> *because I felt many of my students don't have the quiet time necessary to think about themselves and their place in the world.... In school [they] are bombarded with constant noise and stimuli—muffled announcements, bells going off every 42 minutes, bangs on classroom doors ... and rarely, if ever,*

> *do [they] experience silence, let alone solitude. . . . I would like to create a quiet atmosphere in my classroom where students have time to sit in silence and reflect on their lives.*

In a fast-paced world, Melanie invited students to slow down. When I visited her classroom, students were often reading or writing, sometimes with soft music playing in the background. For the study of solitude, she asked them to respond in writing to poems, stories, and essays; to reflect in their journals on various questions; and to compose their own poetry or fiction. Before one weekend, she asked each student to "go off in solitude to an empty room, a park, or a diner, and open your journal to a clean page. . . ." She, too, completed the assignments. "I have been very impressed," she reported in the middle of the project,

> *with the level of discussions we have been having in my classroom. . . . I also noticed that my students have no problem writing silently. In fact many of them seem to be enjoying the quiet time. . . .*
>
> *[They] have really enjoyed the fact that I have joined in with them on all the writing assignments. When we share our writing in the class, we can all discuss the difficulties we have had with an assignment, and they also know that I won't give them anything to do that I myself wouldn't do.*

In the portfolios they compiled at the end of the study, students reflected on the pieces they had chosen to include and on the process of writing them. The few I was able to read showed the students' involvement. Katherine, for example, writing about her response to an essay on loneliness, focused on what she had learned in the process:

> *I choosed [this piece] because I realized that there is a change in me that has to do with loneliness. I used to love to be alone but now I do not. . . . I changed for many reasons but if I hadn't write about it, I wouldn't realize it. It's a good piece because [I] analized what I think are the reasons for not wanting to be alone.*

Faced with her students' indifference, Gillian drew on her own experience as a writer. To begin her project, she used timelines she had created in a writing project course; to continue it, she consulted Ronni and project colleagues about writing groups, feedback sheets, and publishing students' work. . . . Jeanne-Marie commented, "It would never have happened if teachers weren't talking to each other."

Trung, a student from Vietnam, wrote about composing an essay he had called "My Feelings on a Rain Day," which he had revised extensively:

> *I enjoyed comparing the different between the rain in the USA and the rain in my native country. The rain in the USA was cold and sadness. I also met much challenge to expound all my feelings when I was writing this project. I could not rewrite whole event perfectly like I thought. . . . But I paid attention on it many hours.*

For the read-around at the end of the inquiry course, Melanie chose to read a piece from her own journal on solitude.

Gillian's Memoir Project

Gillian Grant also developed an extended project—one that explored an issue that troubled her. Her Spanish-speaking ESL students, she thought, were indifferent to learning English, unwilling to put in the effort to master it. In a piece beginning "Aaaarggh!" she wrote of her frustration:

> *The kids I teach see an America where Spanish rules the day: on the streets, in the businesses, on the radio and TV, at home, with their friends, and even in school where such core classes as math, science, and history are offered in Spanish.* (Course anthology, fall 1998.)

Why indeed, she asked, should they struggle over English "when it appears to be irrelevant to their daily life?" Yet without it, she believed, they would never succeed in the United States. "I get so frustrated," she wrote, "that I am nearly brought to tears."

Members of her writing group counseled patience. "It takes time," they said. "Maybe years. Maybe a generation." Gillian wasn't willing to wait. "I reached out to my colleagues," she wrote, "and was graced with some good ideas."

In a previous project course, Gillian had written a memoir based on a personal timeline; now she decided to try timelines with her students. She showed them hers, in several versions, and invited them to create their own. When the timelines were finished, she displayed them in class. Later, each student, with the help of classmates, chose an incident from his or her timeline to develop into a memoir. "I explained . . . that we would do subsequent drafts," Gillian wrote later, "so they should take care to pick subjects they were willing to spend time investigating." Among the topics students chose: "How I Began To Sing Spanish Reggae," "My Fifteenth Birthday," "Boy Friends," "I Got Robbed," "The Time I Got Left Back," "My First Fight," "When My Grandfather Died," "When I Left My Country," and "Being a Mom."

Gillian found that writing on these topics held her students' interests. Like Ronni [Tobman-Michelen, on-site teacher-consultant for the NYCWP] herself in her first year in the project, Gillian's students found that they wrote better about things they knew and cared about. They wanted their pieces to ring true. With Ronni's help, Gillian created feedback sheets, so they could help each other as they revised and edited their drafts. Committed to the project, students added material in response to their classmates' questions, asked their parents to help them with details, and sought out the English words they needed. Draft followed draft, each stapled to the one before it. Some students completed four drafts, others as many as five. "Somewhere along the way," wrote Gillian,

> *I realized my project had turned into a baby and was growing. I felt the desire to do something with these writing samples my kids produced and worked so hard on.... I looked to my colleagues for inspiration and got the wonderful idea of collecting the work and making an in-house publication....*

Jeanne-Marie, who had done something similar, suggested that Gillian enlist the help of Sonia Mullings, a computer teacher. Sonia invited Gillian to speak with her students, who agreed to type the final drafts. The school's supervisors helped fund photocopying and binding. Gillian herself spent "a ton of my time" assembling an eighty-seven-page anthology, *Stories of Our Lives*, and felt it was "well-placed effort." She found that students she'd seen as indifferent to English had genuinely labored over their pieces. Because of the publication, they now saw themselves as writers—and writers in English. "I encountered surprisingly little resistance the whole way through," she wrote in her introduction to the anthology. "I do believe that my kids benefited from the opportunity to do their very best."

The experience was illuminating as well as gratifying. Faced with her students' indifference, Gillian drew on her own experience as a writer. To begin her project, she used timelines she had created in a writing project course; to continue it, she consulted Ronni and project colleagues about writing groups, feedback sheets, and publishing students' work. Citing Gillian's project as an example of collaboration, Jeanne-Marie commented, "It would never have happened if teachers weren't talking to each other."

Approaches to Reading

At Roosevelt, teachers' teaching of reading, like their teaching of writing, often draws on their experience in project courses. Ronni, in her 1997 "Review of Practice," quoted ESL teacher Marcy Jones:

> *Because of my own positive experience in a reading group ... I wanted to try something like it in my classroom. By reading a book together, listening to someone else's interpretation in response to the same event, I became more engaged in the reading.... I observed that even the people in the group who didn't like the book interacted.*

Marcy wanted, she told Ronni, "to create this experience for students who felt frustrated with reading." She organized reading groups, stocked the classroom with books, and asked her students to respond to the books in reading logs, dialogues, letters to authors, letters to characters, postcards, and book covers. At the end of the year, she told me, students wrote her letters about their reading; she gave me a copy of the letter she wrote back:

> *I enjoyed reading your journals.... The dialogues brought some of the characters to life. I must admit I've read some of these books dozens of times and the characters weren't flesh and blood until your words brought them off the page....*
>
> *Many of you loved the group work. Your letters informed me that book groups helped you to understand the plot and make the story more interesting.... You could ask each other questions, write to each other, and engage in other activities that make reading more exciting.*

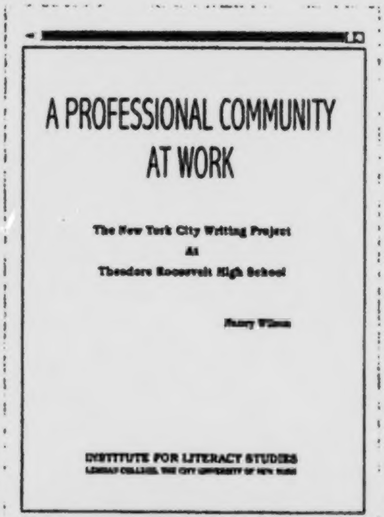
Toward the end of the project, Ronni visited Marcy's fifth-period class. Earlier in the year, she reported, it had been a rowdy group. Marcy had spent much of her time

> *quieting [students] down and getting them to stay on task. Reading workshop changed their behavior. Now, they sit reading, engaged in books, talking in small groups, and keeping a folder where they write in response to their reading.* (Course anthology, spring 1997.)

Watching her students, Marcy told Ronni, "I have noticed a real change in their attitudes."

Reading the above in a draft of this report, Marcy, Jeanne-Marie, and several other teachers cautioned me against presenting an overly rosy view of their classrooms. "You lose some kids," said Marcy. "They put their heads on their desks. They tune out." And Jeanne-Marie noted what was missing in the draft:

> *It still takes [some students] time to settle down. . . . Where is the kid who looks up at me after ten minutes and says he can't read anymore because his eyes hurt or because he's tired of reading already? . . . It's not like all kids have miraculously turned into angels who joyously read and write all day.*


A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY AT WORK

The New York City Writing Project
At
Theodore Roosevelt High School

INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY STUDIES

Copies of A Professional Community at Work: The New York City Writing Project at Theodore Roosevelt High School *are available for $15 each from the Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, CUNY, 250 Bedford Park Blvd. West, Bronx, NY 10468. (Checks should be made payable to the Research Foundation of CUNY).*

I knew there were no miracles. I'd seen teachers coax and cajole students to read the texts in front of them, seen them lift students' heads off desks and put pens into their hands. And yet I'd seen classroom after classroom in which students and teachers were reading.

Veronica Blackman moves carefully in her classroom, introducing new strategies a little at a time. "I try things from the writing project class," she told me, "maybe not right away, maybe next term. . . . I have to internalize them myself." She's used reading logs with her special education students and asked them to write reading histories—both activities she herself found useful. She's encouraged them to choose their own reading materials. She is building up to organizing reading groups, she told me; she'll probably try them next year.

Gillian tried a series of "Reading Fridays" in her ESL classes. Students brought books to class, read them in class, and wrote about them. Asked what they thought of this activity, she wrote in a later account, "A surprising number of students said they like it because it helps them with their English." Several were impressed that she set aside class time for reading; they had noted, she wrote, "that I seem to think reading is important."

As Janeth Wynter-Bell told me, "I can say to the students, 'I have read this in my book club.' It translates to the kids: 'It's a book the teacher read—probably in her spare time.' That's important."

Educator Frank Smith, in an essay often read in project courses, writes of "joining the literacy club" (1988). Students, he observes, need to know, first of all, that such a club exists. At Roosevelt, students witness its existence. Their teachers carry books and talk about them; they write in class and read their poems in public. They are visibly engaged with literacy.

"I am familiar with many teachers who care about history, politics, and literature," writes Deborah Meier, "but there's no way their students could know it." Their lives as readers, writers, and thinkers typically take place outside their classrooms. When she and her colleagues designed Central Park East Secondary School, Meier continues, they took care to provide opportunities for students to see and participate in adults' intellectual lives. "We wanted . . . to create a place that might cause at least some kids to envy us for the life we led, and to want to join our club" (1991, 138).

It does not seem excessively rosy to say that many Roosevelt students became aware that the literacy club was a place to aspire to and enjoy.

References

Meier, Deborah. 1991. "The Kindergarten Tradition in the High School." In *Progressive Education for the 1990s*, ed. Kathe Jervis and Carol Mongtag. New York: Teachers College Press.

Smith, Frank. 1988. *Joining the Literacy Club.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Nancy Wilson has spent twenty years as a teacher-consultant and researcher for the New York City Writing Project and the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, The City University of New York. Among her other writing experiences, she and Sondra Perl co-wrote *Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work* (Heinemann, 1986), a book about writing teachers in one Long Island school district.

Reprinted with permission from A Professional Community at Work: The New York City Writing Project at Theodore Roosevelt High School, *a publication of the Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, CUNY.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The National Writing Project supports teachers like you.

The National Writing Project values teacher knowledge.

The National Writing Project knows teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.

The National Writing Project believes teachers are the key to reform in education.

Become a National Writing Project Associate, and you will receive *The Quarterly*, our professional journal written by and for teachers; *The Voice*, our national newsletter that puts you in touch with outstanding teachers across the country; and a 20 percent discount on NWP books.

To learn more about the National Writing Project, or to find a site near you, please call (510) 642-0963.

QW01

Yes, I want to support the National Writing Project!

I've enclosed my contribution. Please put me on your mailing list so that I can receive upcoming issues of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* and a 20 percent discount on NWP books.

Here's how to reach me:

Name ______________________
Address ______________________
City/State/Zip ______________________
Phone ______________________
Email ______________________

Here's my contribution:

☐ $20 (1-year sponsor: 4 *Quarterlys*, 5 *Voices*, and a 20 percent discount on books)

☐ $50 (3-year sponsor: 12 *Quarterlys*, 15 *Voices*, and a 20 percent discount on books)

Local Writing Project ______________________

☐ Check ☐ VISA ☐ MC Account # ☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐

Exp. Date ______________ Signature ______________________

Please mail this form with your payment to:

National Writing Project, University of California, 5511 Tolman Hall #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Or fax this form with your credit card information to (510) 642-4545.

Get the inside story on the early years of the National Writing Project from NWP founder James Gray

***Teachers at the Center* recounts the exciting early years of the National Writing Project in personal, insightful, and humorous stories that only James Gray, its legendary founder, could tell.**

$12.50 / $10.00 for NWP Associates

In 1974, Gray and his colleagues convened the first summer institute of the Bay Area Writing Project at UC Berkeley—the first writing project site in the country. Over the years, Gray's radically new vision of professional development for teachers, and his hard work establishing the writing project model in sites around the country have generated a national network of sites that have served more than two million teachers.

In this delightfully candid memoir, Gray looks back on the early years, describing the mentors who influenced his thinking, the mistakes he made and strategies he used to refine the model, and the difficulties he overcame to gain widespread support for the project. Anyone interested in education, literacy, and teacher development will appreciate the insights in this engaging and forthright narrative.

TO ORDER YOUR COPIES, USE THE FORM BELOW OR CALL THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT AT (510) 642-0963.

Qty	Title	List Price	Assoc. Price	Total
	Teachers at the Center	12.50	10.00	
			SUBTOTAL	
			CA RESIDENTS add 8.25% sales tax	
			For USA and Canada, add SHIPPING & HANDLING $1 for first book, $0.50 for each additional book (call 510-642-0963 for international rates)	
			TOTAL	

My Payment Is Enclosed

Name:

Address:

City/State/Zip:

Phone:

Visa ____ MC ____ Card #:

Expiration: Signature:

Please make checks payable to: National Writing Project.

Mail or fax to:

National Writing Project, 5511 Tolman Hall #1042, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042; fax 510-642-4545

Listening to College Writers

ANNE-MARIE HARVEY

This essay tells the story of how I changed my teaching in two junior-level literature seminars at UC Berkeley . . . to get at what teaching writing in literature courses is really for, how my students responded, and where those responses took all of us.

My teaching over the past several years and my observations in this article are intimately bound up with my decision to leave academia. As I came to understand that I was not looking ahead to many years of college teaching, I was increasingly compelled to ask myself what it's all for—that is, what is the purpose of teaching and studying writing and literature at the university. I tried to discern what students need from college reading and writing, what they will and won't take with them, what will and will not be important to them in their lives.

At the same time, working with the National Writing Project's Making American Literatures research group during the final year of my teaching at UC Berkeley, I grappled with the notion of a tension between teaching forms and nurturing student voices. In our discussions, members argued that to gain access to further education and to success beyond school, students must learn to write in certain forms. Yet, as group members also argued, aiming all writing assignments toward mastery of those forms can silence the voices of students who don't master them easily and students who possess forms of expression that don't mesh well with writing school essays.

Members of the research group, teachers from widely varied educational levels and contexts, struggled with what appeared to be a strong opposition between teaching form and nurturing voice. The group questioned whether these two projects are necessarily at odds: don't some students find their voices through learning forms? Aren't coming into one's voice and using form—any form—to gain access to an audience the same thing? In my own teaching, I asked myself, how can I explore and negotiate a tension between form and voice?

This essay is the story of how I changed my teaching in two junior-level literature seminars at UC Berkeley to address these questions and to get at what teaching writing in literature courses is really for, how my students responded, and where those responses took all of us. Along the way, I gained a sense that it's fundamentally important to demystify the forms in which students are asked to write, to admit that English teachers operate and evaluate on the basis of formulae for writing, and to tease out the sometimes maddeningly mystified features of those formulae. I tried to be as explicit as I knew how about my own expectations and standards for student writing—expectations and standards with sound pedagogical rationale or not. (Explaining those expectations compelled me to sort out which seemed grounded in reasonable goals and which did not.) At the same time, students' frustration with the narrowness of the college-English essay pushed me to move farther beyond the standard school formulae than I ever had before. Through what became swings back and forth from very explicit treatment of form to open choice about form, I came to understand better the urgent importance and extraordinary possibility of inviting students to be present in their own writing.

Conversations About Forms and Voices

In fall 1999, I set out to teach a junior seminar on American literature, gender, and consumer culture. I felt bewildered about deeply questioning the forms and purposes of college writing with junior English majors: weren't they already committed to writing literary-critical essays as part of the discipline they had chosen? But I forged on. Early in the semester, I asked the students to write definitions for terms like *college writing, personal writing,* and *essay.* I did my best to explain to them the features of the essay as I understand it, and to make explicit my own standards for evaluating student essays.

My naïve expectation that the students would be firmly invested in writing college-English essays was quickly extinguished. For example, Kate defined *college writing* this way:

> *That which crushes the creativity out of your writing style and individuality. Basically, here's a frame: use big words, fill in the blanks with an idea that's already been addressed 8 million times, and make sure it's in 12-point font.*

Not many of the students' responses were worded so strongly, but many expressed similar frustration.

Then I asked the students to talk in class about their definitions of college writing. Quickly, we had the basic features and distinctions up on the board. Before long, as I made clear that I wanted to hear the ugly truth, we got past polite talk to some striking honesty about their experiences. For one thing, these English majors were savvy about not just the forms, but also about the formulae that got them good grades. Almost immediately, they offered formulae for the arguments instructors wanted to see. Several students suggested in tandem that you can always begin with a thesis in the form "In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville does X." Further, remarked Hanna, you'll tend to get a good grade for a thesis in this form: "It may appear at first glance that Melville means X, but a deeper look reveals that he means Y"—where Y is more subtle, conflicted, and complicated than the simple message X.

Eureka! The students had lit almost immediately on one of the features academics in the humanities most value in writing, for better or worse: addressing what's not straightforward but rather complex and ambivalent. Alongside their savvy, the students expressed distaste for writing just to meet instructors' expectation: it's "disgusting," remarked Jennie, to write only to please the teacher. They also registered the awkwardness and artificiality of writing for an audience of one—the teacher—but phrasing their argument to mask that: not writing, we laughed, "Dear Anne-Marie."

The other truth that emerged from the series of classroom discussions was that most of these students defined the college essay as a severely limiting form. Over and over, they spoke in terms of what you're *not* supposed to do in college essays: you're not supposed to use the first person because it's too personal and because "mere students" lack the authority to make "I" statements, particularly about literature that's already been studied by scholars. (After saying that you haven't got the authority to use the first person, instructors then ask you to make a strikingly original argument about a Shakespearean play that has been discussed for centuries.) In his written definition, Chris characterized college writing as writing with "no grammatical or syntactical errors." The topics are limited; the style is limited to a formal, academic, and verbose one ("the discourse," one student called it); the language is limited; the form is limited. Calvin suggested that college instructors forbid the use of the first person because it might disrupt the process of "standardization," the purpose of writing instruction.

This sense of limitation was strongly echoed among the members of a second junior seminar in spring 2000, this one focused on Edith Wharton. In this class, I first asked the students to list valuable skills, if any, that they gain from writing college-English essays. But the conversation quickly ranged to frustration with instructors' arbitrary, varied, and sometimes infuriatingly implicit and unprincipled expectations, including the expectation that students both adhere to rigid forms and put their souls into their writing. Explaining his frustration, Colin exclaimed, "They put you in a strait jacket, and then they say 'fly!'" Instructors' exhortation to "put more of yourself" into your writing, suggested Ashkan, becomes just one more paralyzing constraint.

Before we got to these expressions of frustration, the students did list useful skills to be gained from writing college-English essays, and I wrote them on the board:

- Making effective written and spoken arguments
- Being clear and explicit; stating some thing in a way that other people will understand
- Writing in *any* structure
- Becoming highly observant of detail
- Learning to hear and to sort through others' criticism of your work.

My immediate response to this discussion was to lean even harder on myself to become explicit about my own expectations for student writing, offering formulae for thesis statements, paragraphs, the introduction, and explication of evidence. As the students forcefully argued, mystifying the formulae that *are* in operation does not make the essay form less limiting. It just paralyzes student writers.

Toward the middle of the junior seminar on Wharton, I began to hold small-group discussions with students on their writing experiences. From these discussions, a more nuanced view of writing emerged. The students also shed light on my original question about a tension between form and voice.

Strikingly, several students described how practicing form strengthened their voices. In response to my question about memorable or useful writing experiences, Jane remarked that it was writing in the strictest, least personal of forms, a scientific paper, that enabled her to come out and say what she wanted to say in English papers:

> *I had a field project in a biology class.... It actually helped me with my English papers, because they kept hammering into our heads, "Be clear." We don't want any of "Oh, you know, it's a bright sunny day." We don't want any of that. Just get to the point. And that helped me a lot in my English papers because that kind of cleared my head—OK, what's the point?*

Joe, who had told me that his ambition was to become a pastor, spoke eloquently about the power of a voice "well-crafted" through practice in writing.

> *I was having this thought in class today as I listened to [Bharati] Mukherjee lecture. She speaks so carefully and acutely and without seeming hardship.... I'm sure that's from years and years of writing short stories, reading fiction, knowing the language so well! And so as an older woman, able to speak to a class, she's able to say her mind very clearly, and she can say in an hour what it would take me thirty hours of intense study to say about a text. And so to bring that out into life would be one of my goals. I don't know exactly what I'm going to do, but I know that I'll be a voice. And so for my voice to be something that's as well crafted as hers is the most important thing to me about what I'm doing now. Who knows, I could end up being a pastor, and do I want to be in church talking to my congregation and using a thirty-minute sermon where I have all these fuzzy ideas where nobody knows what I'm talking about, or do I want to spend thirty minutes touching their hearts and really penetrating into their lives? And I think that strikes at the importance of what we're doing here. I don't know—I think the essay form is a way of cultivating that craft, and it's been tried and true for a very long time, and I have problems with it, but it is something that is a discipline and that will get us to that point.*

Joe also suggested that being compelled to rigorousness by "staying close to the text" in writing English papers has made his writing better, giving him a "frame" on which to hang his own thinking: "When I got to Berkeley, I was very thankful for an awesome teacher who recognized that I had a lot of creativity and wanted to create my own ideas, but recognized that I also needed to be articulate—and I also needed to be humbled."

Even further, Steven suggested that writing literary-critical essays in particular, far from excluding or standardizing the personal, serves a deep personal function:

> *For me, what I enjoy is writing about literature and interacting with it on such an analytical level. Especially looking at situations of characters, the choices they make and how they end up.... [I]t's not really applicable to my life, but it is in a way. You get something personal from that. Not like a lesson, but kind of like a lesson.... So, you know, it's hard to separate it from your life.*

Steven implies that it's not only possible, but actually irresistible to connect literary analysis with one's own life in school writing.

On the other hand, students spoke vehemently about how being required to use school forms alienated them and shut them down. Melinda talked about her experiences of writing instruction at the junior college she attended before transferring to UC Berkeley: "When we did those stupid in-class timed things, it was all about structure ... and that was very alienating to a student who doesn't get it, because immediately you shut down and you just think, fine. I'll just write whatever." Talese responded that she, too, simply checked out when the form became too restrictive in her junior-college classes: "If you're not driven, or you don't have confidence—I would be close to just giving up." The students in the small-group discussions argued forcibly that without moments of relative freedom—freewriting or "creative" assignments—many will become so alienated that that they will permanently absent themselves from school writing and writing in general.

At the same time, both Talese and Melinda acknowledged that learning forms is important. Talese noted that she was grateful that teachers had pushed her to overcome her lack of confidence with the five-paragraph essay, placing her in AP English despite an apparent lack of competence in that form. When the group discussed the usefulness of freewriting that allows a natural "flow" of thought, Talese concluded that it's the "clarity" that results from such flow that's valuable: "With stream-of-consciousness, there's generally clarity at the end. But through it, it's kind of a working process, isn't it, where everything's kind of pouring out of your brain. But you need the form also. In order to learn, you need both."

In my inquiry about teaching form and giving free reign to student voices, these small-group discussions pushed me to a similar conclusion: in order to learn, you need both. As the students argued, teachers need to be very explicit about their expectations for form. It's only fair, and it saves students paralyzing guesswork. Also, through acknowledging that different teachers have different formulae and by giving students practice in various forms, teachers can frame form not as a universal, mysterious set of restrictions handed down from on high by the god of school essays, but rather as a set of tools available for getting something across to an audience. Teachers can frame form as the means, not the end, of writing. And, as Melinda argued, by giving students choices about form, teachers can also accommodate a variety of learning styles, "especially in high school, when you're trying to figure out what kind of a writer you even are. I think variety's going to help more kids be more successful."

What Do You Most Want to Say, and How Do You Want to Say It?

In fall of 1999, in the American literature, gender, and consumer culture course, I set out with my question about what students will say in honest discussions about form and with my intention to be especially explicit about formulae. Yet, by midterm, compelled by students' frustration at the constraints of the English-class-essay form, I swung in the other direction, giving students enormous latitude in their work, asking them what they most needed to say in relation to the coursework, and asking them to choose or invent the form in which best to say it: written, visual, oral, or musical. My notion was to get them to begin with what they cared about, and therefore to feel motivated to make rigorous use of form to get that across. (I should note up front that this sort of assignment may be most fruitful in a course that already includes visual or musical works.) Below is the assignment I handed out at midterm.

English 100, Assignment 2

Think about what you most want to say about anything in the course so far, and consider in what form or genre you can best say it.

Don't panic.

I'm interested in what you have to say about anything that we've read or that has come up in the course so far: [Here I list *all* the texts for the course, class discussions, and classmates' work that they've read or heard read aloud.]

You may choose or invent any form or genre that suits your purposes. You may also choose your audience: Me? The class? The readership of a publication? An internet audience? Your younger sister? The people on Sproul Plaza?

I'll suggest a guideline of 3–6 typewritten pages.

Here are some possibilities to get you thinking about what you might want to produce. An essay that makes a connection between two of the works we've read, literary and/or critical; a parody of an author we've read; a poem; a fictional dialogue between critics about an author's work; a commentary, letter to the editor, or open letter about an issue raised by an author or by classmates, as you see it in contemporary life; an illustrated children's book that adapts an author's work to a young audience; an alternate ending to a work that reveals something about your view of that work; an essay composed partly or entirely of images, like John Berger's in *Ways of Seeing*; a letter to your mother about an issue an author has raised for you personally.

I'll ask you to hand in with your piece a brief, informal statement about what you set out to achieve: that is, to get across to an audience and to learn as a writer.

This is not a bizarreness contest. If what you most want to do is write an essay interpreting a literary work, go for it. Nor is this a contest about who can spend the most time on the project. I encourage you to budget the same amount of time you would spend producing a short essay. In fact, this is not a contest at all. I don't grade on a curve, and I'll evaluate each project on its own terms.

I expect that many of you will be worried about your grades. Here are a few criteria that I'll use to evaluate your work: 1) Meaningfulness and clarity. I'd like to be able to figure out what you're trying to get across, or what effect you wish the piece to have on the reader. 2) Voice. I'd like to encounter genuine responses, genuine expressions of something that matters to you. 3) Effective use of the form you choose or invent. If it's an essay, does it have a strong thesis? If it's a lyrical poem, do you avoid clichés and choose evocative images?

One-paragraph proposal due in class [a week and a half or so before the project deadline]. Briefly describe what you'd like to get across to your reader and gain as a writer and how you'll go about it.

Final projects due [date]. I'll make arrangements for students to read excerpts and/or present visual projects to the class. We'll handle this based on what forms you choose and how you prefer to present.

When I read the assignment aloud and then asked for questions, I was faced with a set of blank stares, the kind that usually mean students are harboring resentment, confusion, or alarm. "What do your blank stares mean?" I asked. "Are you feeling resentful, confused, or alarmed?" After more hesitation, students responded with all three. "What do you really want us to do here?" they asked. "How will you really evaluate our work? Won't people who put the most time in or do the weirdest project get the best grades?" One student even questioned whether I was qualified to evaluate "creative" work.

> *For some, the process of becoming present in their own writing, of acting as* writers, *requires first a release from the constraints of conventional forms.*

By the time the students handed in their project proposals, their anger and anxiety had begun to shade into excitement. Many students—many more than for a usual essay—turned up in my office hours to discuss their ideas, apparently out of anxiety *and* excitement. As part of my effort to alleviate anxiety about grades, I asked them to assign themselves grades and write a brief explanation of the grade to hand in with their work. While I reserved the power to give final grades, the students' justifications ultimately made very interesting reading on what they set out to achieve.

The week when students presented and responded to these projects was the most marvelous of my UC Berkeley teaching career. Far from having to lean on students to present, I had difficulty managing class time to fit in all of those who wanted to speak to the class on what they'd done. These are a few of the projects that we saw, read, or heard excerpted that week:

- Wenchi's brilliant rendition of Cholly Breedlove's section in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, rewritten in the style and voice of Theodore Dreiser. At one stroke, Wenchi unpacked the difficult meanings of this section in Morrison and lampooned Dreiser's clumsily explicit prose. ("There are moments in every childhood when the child approaches the distinct boundary separating childhood from blossoming adulthood Very frequently, these moments of realization are spurred by or involve a newly developed consciousness regarding the distinction between the sexes....")
- Malcolm's multimedia project, also inspired by *The Bluest Eye*, as well as work we'd done with advertising: videotaped interviews with African American women about their own self-images in relation to the media; a collage of media images showing the prevalence of a light-skinned, straight-haired ideal for black women; and an open letter to "magazine advertisers" arguing that they need to "present black models of various shades so young black girls grow up with a broader definition of beauty."
- At the other end of the political spectrum, Michelle's fictional dialogue in which a lingerie company executive defends the practice of using idealized images of women to sell lingerie.
- Kristin's heartfelt letter to her mother, asking her to stop pressuring her to live up to a thin, glamorous media ideal of womanhood.
- Tracy's astute and hilarious parodies of print ads, including one that used over-the-top sexual images of women to market blueberries. Tracy had struggled unsuccessfully with writing a conventional essay earlier in the course, but her ad parodies were among those projects most admired and discussed by the class.
- Chris's photographs in which he posed male friends to imitate the gestures of female models in published advertising, noting the charming and disturbing effects, and exploring the differences between ideas of feminine and masculine "sexiness" for both gay and straight viewers.
- Jennie's group of poems about her childhood, including one called "Trenzas," about the meaning of braids: "If I could have one wish/ I would wish for trenzas/ Long silky ropes that swing below my waist/ Queztalcoatl sashaying down my back...."
- Lacey's installation piece, which demonstrated that "voice" can be a complicated, questioning thing. The viewer sat on one of two stools. On the shorter stool, painted black, you listened through headphones to a soundtrack of tribal music from Nigeria. On the higher stool, painted white, you listened to European baroque music. Meanwhile, you watched a series of slides of disturbing images: a dead horse strung up on a line, meat, women of various races dressed in exoticized, quasi-tribal costumes and posed for the camera. The project provoked this viewer to think about how the objectified exotic looks from different cultural "seats."

After the readings, presentations, and time for students to peruse the gallery, I asked them each to choose one project and write a brief response to it. Later, I also asked each student to write about the experience of producing this project, comparing it to writing a conventional essay.

In short, almost across the board, students worked harder than they ever had on conventional essays, found ideas and arguments that mattered to them, and—perhaps most compellingly—treated one another as artists whose work deserved interpretation and critique on its own terms, rather than a superficial measuring against teachers' yawn-worthy, irrelevant standards for form. As much as they were motivated by writing about what actually interested them, they seemed exhilarated by the risk and pleasure of using forms unconventional for literature classes. At the same time, many students set out to make arguments, using those features of the essay form they'd practiced before to create the effect that they desired: Malcolm's open letter, for example, was concise and argumentative with a clear thesis.

This was the farthest I've ever gotten on the road to students treating one another's work as literature, as texts for the course whose forms and ideas could serve as springboards for further thought. For example, in her final project for the course, Tasha actually based her work primarily on Malcolm's. She noted that, in the images he had chosen, idealized black men were darker-skinned than women, and she surveyed middle-schoolers about their racial and gender self-images in relation to media idols.

During the spring 2000 course on Edith Wharton, having again set out to concentrate on making form and formulae explicit, I found myself inexorably drawn back to asking what the students most needed to say, and asking them to choose or invent the form in which to say it. Again, the results were compelling. Among the students of the small-group discussions, Steven wrote a sophisticated critical essay about masculinity in Wharton, and Jane wrote a letter in the voice of one of Wharton's characters to the tyrannical husband in the short story, teasing out Wharton's feminist messages. Joe came to my office hours and asked with some trepidation whether he could attempt a sermon about despair and redemption based on *Ethan Frome*. Talese wrote a personal essay describing how her understanding of Wharton's novel *Summer* had changed from when she read it at seventeen to now, at age thirty-two, and exploring what this shift means about her own growth.

At root, I enjoyed myself more when I asked students what they really wanted to say: I looked forward to encountering their projects, their all-over-the-map priorities and styles and personalities, rather than dreading a stack of essays ground out with absent, agonized, or carefully hidden personal engagement from the people who produced them. Rather than filling up a form with words, the students found, shaped, and used the forms they needed to articulate themselves. As I told the students, I couldn't resist having this measure of fun during my last chance to do so as a teacher at UC Berkeley.

After this paean to my students' work, I should note the very real costs and downsides to doing "both"—to spending class time on being explicit about form and making some conventional assignments even as I opened the door wide to many forms in other assignments. First, it's a lot of hard work for the instructor. I spent much more time conferring in office hours, responding to student proposals, and writing responses to student work than I would have with conventional essays. Second, a few students really checked out in response to the "open" assignment, producing slapdash work that they didn't seem to care about. Of course, the chances are good that those students would have done so in response to a more conventional assignment—but the point is that freedom in form will not reach *all* students, and some will see it as a way out of serious work. There are more specific downfalls, as well. At the end of the fall 1999 seminar, Michelle took advantage of an open and flexible final assignment to write a virulent personal attack on me and what she perceived to be my politics. It was one of the most challenging grading tasks I've ever taken on. (She got a B.) But I suppose she did write about what really mattered to her.

The most serious problem remains simply that there's only so much time to spend with students. When I spent time on multigenre projects, I spent less time training students in the forms that they'll need for their next English course, and less time training them in the correctness they'll need to be heard in the world and on the job. Those students who most *need* to practice writing correct, expository prose will not do so if they're given a choice; who wants to struggle in an alienating form? These are serious issues, and serious trade-offs in my obligations as a writing teacher. But watching students find exhilaration and confidence in new forms and in saying what mattered to them, I found that trade-off worth making.

"To Really Lay It Down, You Have to Pull It Out of Yourself"

What has stayed with me most strongly from the past two semesters has been students' remarks that the most important thing they will take with them from English classes into the rest of their lives is the ability to bring out what is deepest in themselves with clarity, to take that terrible risk, and to be heard and understood by someone, whether a teacher, their classmates, or an even broader audience. As Allison said, "To really lay it down, you have to pull it out of yourself, you have to pull out things that are personal to you." For some, the process of becoming present in their own writing, of acting as *writers*, requires first a release from the constraints of conventional forms. For others, that practice and that risk is grounded in a struggle with form, the process of creating what we came in the small-group discussions to call "clarity of voice," bringing what's hardest to bring out into the light of articulateness in a form that someone else can understand.

On the last day of the spring 2000 semester, my last day of teaching at UC Berkeley, I watched the students in my seminar on Edith Wharton present their final projects. They showed their collages and illustrations, excerpted their adaptations of Wharton as children's stories, folktales, or *Archie* comics, described their parodies and alternative endings and critical arguments. Some projects that weren't brilliantly executed were great accomplishments of another kind. A student named Jeanene, who had rarely spoken throughout the term, explained her collage that used contemporary images in a comic way to show connections and contrasts between *Summer* and *Ethan Frome*, and then hesitantly produced a poem called "Hot and Cold Ethan" (about the two books) that she had been unable to resist adding to the project. The poem was sometimes clichéd, but at times a rap-sounding modernization of Wharton—and she had felt *compelled* to write it and read it aloud to the class.

> *With a baby on the way she was feeling*
> *the heat*
> *But no matter what, she wouldn't take*
> *to the street.*
> *Harney was a cheater, this much was*
> *clear,*
> *And old Mr. Royall too fond of his beer.*

As she read, her hands shook so hard that the paper trembled. Reading this poem mattered to her, and therefore made her vulnerable. Recognizing her presence in the work and appreciating its humor, the class applauded enthusiastically.

Finally, Joe stood up to give his sermon. I had never seen him so shaky. He had always spoken confidently and fluently to the class, but now, standing in front of his peers, he flushed, trembled, and hunched nervously over his paper. I imagine that part of what he felt was the risk of speaking about his faith in the profoundly secular setting of a university classroom. He explained call-and-response, urging people to interject "Praise the Lord" or "Amen" as the spirit moved them. No one did. He presented a short, pre-emptive defense of himself as a Christian, and described the struggle of his writing:

> *The only other thing I would ask is that you listen to me. I am not every other Christian and don't deserve preconceptions, good or bad. I am Joe, the guy in your English class who is shaking before you with nervousness because he is about to share something that is both personal and powerful.*
>
> *Writing this sermon has been a struggle for me. I woke up this morning with a sense of incompletion, and what began as an attempt to add the final touches to what I hoped was a polished sermon, turned into a rejection of all I had set out to do.... What I rejected was my decision to force Wharton's characters into my idea of redemption. So, instead of preparing to give a poised delivery of a polished sermon, I spent the small hours of this Thursday morning writing what I hope is an honest flow of personal reaction to Wharton's work.... What I'm left with then, is an attempt to present the lack of redemption provided by Wharton's world view, and contrast this with my world view, where I find ultimate redemption.*

The rest of Joe's sermon, unlike the brilliant, literary-critical essay he had written earlier in the semester, was awkward, meager in its treatment of Wharton, and explicit in its call to Christian faith. He was honest about his failure to find the messages he was looking for in Wharton. The class applauded stiffly and politely at the end. And I understood that this experience of bringing his deepest beliefs—and his most honest view of the literature—to light in an English class was terribly important to Joe, much more so than writing his earlier essay.

As Jeanene, Joe, and each of the students read aloud that day, I oriented every fiber in my body toward the speaker, silently urging the rest of the class to do the same: *I'm listening; we're listening; we hear you.* That is my most important achievement as a teacher: making it possible for students to take that terrifying risk of articulating something that matters in a form other people can understand, and showing them that they have been heard and understood. Like Joe, they only ask that we listen. If we do, maybe they'll take that risk again.

Anne-Marie Harvey is a San Francisco freelance writer and editor. Though no longer teaching at UC Berkeley, she continues to participate in Making American Literatures, a research group affiliated with the Bay Area Writing Project focusing on innovative ways to teach writing. "Listening to College Writers" is slated to appear in a collection of essays resulting from that research.

Unloading the Excess Baggage

A Teacher's Story

BETH HALBERT

I now realize that I missed a great opportunity when I stuffed Darrien's memoir in my red grade book and hoped it would disappear. I made the mistake that schools often make.

"I don't give a f--- who you run with, I'll blast yo' ass!" My mouth dropped when I read the first line of Darrien's memoir. This was the last writing assignment that I had given to my tenth grade English students, and Darrien, a young man in my first block, had asked me if I thought it would be all right for him to write about the school that he attended when he lived in Chicago. I assured him that I thought that would be great, but as I continued to read Darrien's description of his school in Chicago, I wondered. Darrien described the atmosphere. Guns and drugs were uncontrolled there, and he "had rank" in a gang that he called "GD."

The rest of Darrien's memoir described a conflict he had with a young man he calls "Benadryl," a Blackstone from the southeast side. The altercation and the memoir ended with Darrien and his gang "stomping a mud hole in his ass." Darrien writes, "He was as bloody as DMX on the cover of his CD 'Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of My Blood.'"

The first time I met Darrien was in the fall of 1999 when he was placed in my competency English class at Mt. Juliet High School. I was fresh out of college, and this was my first teaching assignment. Competency English is a class for students who have failed the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) test one or more times. I was told that my sole objective as the teacher was to help these students pass the test. When I graded the diagnostic tests that I gave the first couple of days of class, I noticed that Darrien's grades were well above passing on both the grammar and the reading portion.

"Darrien, how in the world did you fail the TCAP?" I asked him one day after class. "You have the highest grades in the class on both of the diagnostic tests."

"Man, Ms. Halbert, I haven't even taken that test yet. I just moved here from Chicago. They just stuck me in here 'cause all the other classes were full. I already know all this stuff," he replied.

Even though I knew that Darrien was not challenged and was really wasting his time in competency English, I was, for selfish reasons, glad he was in my class. I could always count on him to discuss the books we were reading when no one else would. I worried about him, though, when I saw him with other students who I knew didn't care about their education. The news that Darrien had made the junior varsity basketball team pleased me because I hoped that would keep him out of trouble.

I was pleased to see Darrien's familiar face in my tenth grade English class in January when we changed classes because of the block schedule. Darrien was in my first period class again, and over the course of the first four-week grading period, I began to notice that Darrien was frequently late and often absent from class. Mt. Juliet High School has an attendance grade that accounts for twenty percent of the students' average. Darrien's attendance was so low it dropped him a whole letter grade.

"Darrien, do you realize that your attendance grade has pulled you from a high B to a low C this four weeks? What's going on?"

"Yeah, I know. I keep sleeping through my alarm. My mama has to be at work at six in the morning. I have to get myself up, and if I sleep through my alarm, I miss my ride. I'll do better. I promise."

Darrien's attendance did improve somewhat, and he worked hard in class when he was there. When I let the students choose their own topics for their research papers, Darrien chose to write about DMX, a rap artist. It was also around this time that I had to write a disciplinary referral for Darrien because I had caught him with a beeper. He seemed unconcerned about the referral and about the three days of out-of-school suspension that followed.

After I graded Darrien's memoir, I asked him for permission to use it in a teaching demonstration at the West Tennessee Writing Project Summer Institute. He agreed, but asked if he could retype and revise it before I used it. The next day, he brought the retyped copy to me.

I reacted to Darrien's memoir on three different levels that all carried different feelings and concerns. I reacted as a first-year teacher, as a writing teacher, and as a concerned adult. As a first-year teacher, I was extremely anxious about the profanity and violence in the memoir. Darrien could have been suspended for speaking those same words in the classroom. I wanted my students to be able to "publish" their writing by reading it aloud, but I knew that this was impossible in Darrien's case. The other students in the classroom would have glorified the profanity and violence in the memoir.

I worried about the reaction of my colleagues and principal. If they read Darrien's paper, would he be punished or reprimanded for writing so honestly about his experience in Chicago? Would I be reprimanded for encouraging him to do so? I also reacted to Darrien's paper as a teacher who believes strongly that her students learn by writing. Darrien's memoir was a powerful piece of writing. He employed many techniques in his paper that we had not even discussed in class. He had dialogue, he made sure that the reader knew the setting, he ended his paper where he started it, and he had a commanding voice throughout the paper. I believed this was a good piece of writing, but I was afraid to encourage Darrien or to compliment his writing because of the subject matter.

I also reacted to Darrien's paper as a concerned adult. I was worried about Darrien. I wanted to plead with him not to get involved in the gangs or wannabe-gangs at Mt. Juliet High School. I wanted to tell him that he was too intelligent to be a part of that. I wanted to tell him that handling your problems or disagreements with violence was wrong. I wanted to tell him that I saw him going down that same path again and that he would end up in a hospital or in jail if he continued.

Upon further reflection, I now realize that I missed a great opportunity when I stuffed Darrien's memoir in my red grade book and hoped it would disappear. I made the mistake that schools often make. As Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly write in their book *An Unquiet Pedagogy*, "Schools are accustomed to seeing what students do bring with them from the outside—stories, ideas, beliefs—as excess baggage rather than chests full of tools to aid their learning." I missed an opportunity to teach Darrien about the difference between a personal narrative and a memoir. I missed an opportunity to teach him about the relationship between the speaker, subject, and audience in a piece of writing.

One of the first things that I told my students about memoir as a genre was that it was different from a personal narrative. Nancie Atwell says, "Memoir is how writers look for the past and make sense of it. We figure out who we are, who we have become and what it means to us." Lucy Calkins asks her students "Why do you remember this moment? What does it say about your whole life?" Darrien wrote powerfully about the facts of his experience, but he didn't tell us what he thought about it or what he felt about it.

I also could have talked to Darrien about audience and who the audience for this paper was. If it was just a reflective or therapeutic piece of writing, then he should have been allowed to write it like he wanted to, but if it was writing for publication, then he may have wanted to rethink some of the language. Roskelly talks about the rhetorical triangle and how writing teachers can explain the relationship between the speaker, subject, and audience. I could have talked to Darrien about what his aim or purpose was in writing this paper.

And, lastly, I missed an opportunity to connect with Darrien in a one-on-one writing conference. Steve Zemelman and Harvey Daniels say that "the direct, personal focusing that happens in a conference is what makes it one of the most powerful things a teacher can do to promote growth in writing." If I had conferenced with Darrien, I could have encouraged him, as a writer, to take this piece of writing further. I should have asked him those questions: Why is this significant? So what? How has this experience affected your life?

Calkins tells about the beneficial conferences that she has had with Donald Murray about her own writing. She said he asked her questions, "not little questions to show me he was interested in my topic but big questions about my experience and intentions and problems and discoveries." I

continued on page 31

Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues

LINDA CHRISTENSEN, WITH BILL BIGELOW

An Excerpt from Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word

"Why reading, writing, and rising up?" author Linda Christensen asks in the introduction to her book of the same name. "Because during my 24 years of teaching literacy skills in the classroom, I came to understand that reading and writing are ultimately political acts . . . [and] should be emancipatory acts."

With this thought, Christensen begins the journey through this collection of work focused on teaching for social justice. What follows are eight practical and inspirational chapters—essays, lesson plans, strategies, and student writing—each quite different from another and yet cohesive in their bend toward their common goal of supporting reading and writing while inspiring a sense of social justice.

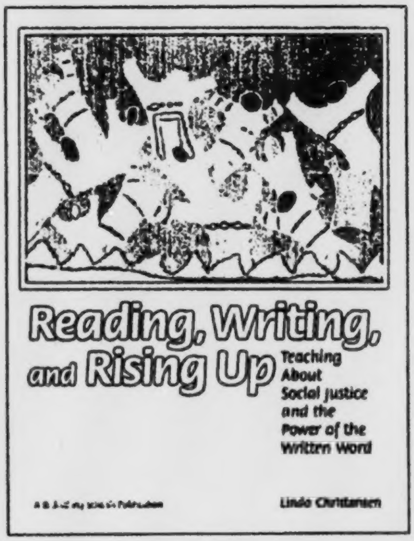
The heart of the book, conceived during Christensen's time at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, comes out of her work with colleagues and parent activists in communities fostered by organizations such as Rethinking Schools, National Coalition of Education Activists, and the National Writing Project. Through that work, Christensen discovered that when she and her students "stopped reading novels as ends in themselves and started reading and examining society—from cartoons to immigration laws to the politics of language—and taking action" through lessons such as those found in her book, her students became more engaged in learning.

—The Editors

One of the most important aims of teaching is to prompt students to empathize with other human beings. This is no easy accomplishment in a society that pits people against each other, offers vastly greater or lesser amounts of privilege based on accidents of birth, and rewards exploitation with wealth and power. Empathy, or "social imagination," as Peter Johnson calls it in *The Reading Teacher*, allows students to connect to "the other" with whom, on the surface, they may appear to have little in common. A social imagination encourages students to construct a more profound "we" than daily life ordinarily permits. A social imagination prompts students to wonder about the social contexts that provoke hurtful behaviors, rather than simply to dismiss individuals as inherently "evil" or "greedy."

Imagining Thoughts of Others

One teaching method Bill Bigelow and I use to promote empathy, and return to unit after unit, is the interior monologue. An interior monologue is simply the imagined thoughts of a character in history, literature, or life at a specific point in time. After watching a film, reading a novel, short story, or essay, or performing improvisation skits, the class brainstorms particular key moments, turning points, or critical passages characters confronted. During a unit on the Vietnam War, we watch the 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*. The film (available in many video stores) weaves interviews


Reading, Writing, and Rising Up
Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word
Linda Christensen

with U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese with newsreel footage of the war and unexpected scenes of daily life in the United States. Student suggestions included writing from the points of view of an American pilot who has become critical of his role in the war, a North Vietnamese man whose entire family has been killed in a bombing raid, a Native American Marine who was called "blanket ass" and "squaw" by commanding officers, and a Buddhist monk who solemnly lectures the United States on the futility of trying to conquer Vietnam.

Sometimes students choose to write from the situations we brainstorm; sometimes they don't. The monologue technique gives structure to the assignment, but the freedom to write from anyone's point of view allows students to mold the piece to the contours of their lives and interests.

Deanna Wesson chose to write her interior monologue as a poem. She picked a quote from a soldier who said, "We're taught to obey our government. I would have to go if I were called." She wrote:

It doesn't matter
that I would be going against
all the values by which I've lived my life.
It doesn't matter
that I would break all of God's
commandments.
It doesn't matter that I would have to
murder
and torture
innocent human beings
It doesn't matter
that this war has been caused
by my own government
It doesn't matter
that I have no idea why we're
fighting
It doesn't matter
that my government is poisoning
soldiers with Agent Orange
It doesn't matter
that my "enemies" are fighting only
for the right to govern themselves.
It doesn't matter.

Using the soldier's words as a jump-off point, Deanna explores how she might feel if she were in the soldier's place. Throughout the poem, she also uses other information she learned during the film.

In our classroom circle, students read their pieces aloud and give positive comments on each other's work. Listening to the collection of writings offers students an intimate portrait of the social consequences of the war. We feel rather than observe from a distance. These portraits provide us a way to talk about the film without writing typical discussion questions. The issues embedded in the text are viewed through a more personal lens. The different lives that students imagine and their different interpretations give us opportunities to explore the film or reading more thoroughly.

As is true any time we wonder about other people's lives, our monologues are only guesses, at times marred by stereotype. But the very act of considering, "How might this person experience this situation?" develops an important "habit of the mind" and draws us closer together. We write the monologues along with our students and can testify to the startling insights and compassion that can arise. Usually, we—students and teachers—tap into our own well of pain, pride, sorrow, confusion, and joy. Although we may never have experienced war, we know the pain of losing a family member or

Jacob Lawrence—
The Migration

By Corinne Rupp

"I wanted to create a work that was very sparse. You'd see it immediately—the dark, the light values, very high in contrast. The warmth in the red." —Jacob Lawrence, 1992

i saw it immediately—
the starkness
the desperation
the pain
faceless men pounding on
steel with steel
faceless women crying
at the rope on the tree
faceless children writing
numbers on the chalkboard
i saw it immediately—
seven basic colors, each portraying
one emotion
one feeling
one more problem
i saw it immediately
i can't be blind to this part
of my history

friend; we have experienced the difficulty of making a tough decision. Likewise, we have felt joy. From these shared emotions, we can construct a piece that allows us to attempt a momentary entrance into another person's life.

In our literature and U.S. history class, we read "A Jury of Her Peers," by Susan Glaspell, a 1917 story about rural women's lives. In the story, Minnie Wright, who lives on an isolated farm, strangles her husband in desperate retaliation for his strangling her bird, the creature that brought her the only moments of joy in an otherwise bleak life. We suggested students might begin their monologue or poem with "Write that I . . . ."

Maryanne assumes the persona of Minnie Wright and tries to imagine what in her life would lead her to commit such a horrid crime:

> *Write that I was young,*
> *tender like the gardenia blossom . . .*
> *I know that you think*
> *I killed my husband,*
> *my keeper, protector.*
> *I stayed in that house, broken*
> *chairs beneath me, husband on top*
> *pushing his fury through me . . .*
> *Please don't forget the bird.*
> *You must tell them about its voice.*
> *It was strangled.*
> *We were strangled.*

I Went Looking for Jefferson

BY AARON WHEELER-KAY

And I Found . . .
All The Nations Of The World
        Wrapped In Baggy Jeans
                Sweat Shirts
                Braids.
Closed Minds Slowly Opening
Like Doors Under Water.
Jefferson Is Our Wetstone;
The Blade Is Our Mind.

Interior monologues tap other people's pain, but they also tap people's hope. After watching *The Killing Floor,* about the World War I black migration to Chicago and union organizing in the stockyards, Debbie wrote an interior monologue from the point of view of Frank, a black worker recently arrived from the South.

> *I sit and listen to the unfamiliar air of music drifting in through my window. Crickets had made music in the South, but never in a tune like this one. I want Mattie to hear this new music. The sound of white men's feet on the dirt avoiding our Black bodies on the sidewalk. Oh, to share the sounds of coins clinking together as I walk.*

As students read their pieces aloud in the circle, we ask them to take notes on the "collective text" they create, to write about the common themes that emerge or questions they're left with. Or we might pose a particular question for them to think about. For example, after we watched the film *Glory,* about the first regiment of African-American soldiers who fought in the Civil War, we wrote a dictionary definition of the word *glory* on the board and asked students as they listened to each other's interior monologues to notice: "Where is the 'glory' in the film *Glory?*" Students' own writings and observations became different points of entry to explore the many contradictions in the film and the events it depicts. For example, Eugene wrote, "In our class reading it was commented that there was mostly pain and not much glory. I think that their pain was their glory, the fact that they were willing to be martyrs. They were fighting for a freedom that they knew they would never have, because most of them would die in the war."

Vietnam: No Scissors to the Truth

BY MEG NIEMI

They sent Dad back
in an army green
Ziplock Freezer Bag
the kind Mama
shells sweet peas in
and stocks in the ice box
as a reminder of
sunnier days.
They sent him as
a reminder,
a token of the war
that his 3-month-old child
would spend the rest
of her life
trying to thaw.
There were no scissors
to cut through to
the truth
They even made sure
he was double sealed
for our protection—
leaving a number
as his only identity.
If Mama had shaken that bag
to spill the truth,
would he have rattled
like those summer sweet peas
shaken from a pod—
would I have heard
Sunday talk
of Kentucky catfish,
Jesus Bugs
and days 'in country'?

Empathy and sympathy are different. When Ghantel writes her interior monologue from the point of view of Mr. _______, Celie's uncaring husband in *The Color Purple*, she shows empathy; she tries to imagine how he looks at the world and wonders what experiences made him who he is. But she's not sympathetic; she doesn't approve of his behavior. In fact, she detests him. Interior monologues, by encouraging students to empathize with other people, no matter how despicable, invite kids to probe for the social causes of human behavior. People are not inherently sexist or racist; and while interior monologues are not an analytical panacea, they can be useful tools in nurturing insight about why people think and act as they do.

Points of Departure for Interior Monologues

In our experience, success with interior monologues depends on:

- Drawing on media or readings that are emotionally powerful
- Brainstorming character and situation choices so most students can find an entry into the assignment
- Allowing students the freedom to find their own passion—they might want to complete the assignment as a poem, a dialogue poem, or from the point of view of an animal or an object (Minnie Wright's dead bird, for instance)
- Giving students the opportunity to read their pieces to the entire class
- Using the collective text of students' writing to launch a discussion of the bigger picture.

Writing interior monologues won't necessarily have students hugging each other as they sing "We Shall Overcome," but they are a worthwhile piece in our attempt to construct a critical, multicultural curriculum. Students need opportunities to think deeply about other people—why they do what they do, why they think what they think. They also need chances to care about each other and the world. Interior monologues are a good place to start.

Reprinted with permission from Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word, *a publication of Rethinking Schools.*

For further information about the book or to order a copy, contact:

Rethinking Schools
1001 East Keefe Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53212
(800) 669-4192
www.rethinkingschools.org.

Excess Baggage

continued from page 27

handled the situation by not handling it, when I should have encouraged Darrien to write more. It may be that he was still too close to the situation and he couldn't see the answers to those questions yet, but it might have prompted him to think about the answers.

I realize as I write this that what I really wanted to happen with this paper was for Darrien to add a last paragraph at the end that says, "I have changed my life since then. I now realize that violence is the wrong way to handle my problems. I will work to rid schools of the evils of gangs and drugs and violence." That would be the happy ending that I really would like to read. John Updike said in his memoir, *Self-Consciousness*, that as we age, we leave behind a litter of old selves. What I really want is for Darrien to write that he has left behind his old self. I have to remind myself, though, that Darrien is sixteen years old and that he may not be ready and willing to leave that old self behind. I have to remind myself that I can ask Darrien the questions. I can talk to him about the audience for his memoir, but I can't change his life, and I can't write his paper for him, and in the end, it may not have the nice, tidy, happy ending that I so wish for him.

Author's Note: I contacted Darrien in the summer of 2000 to ask him if he would read my teaching story and permit me to put the story in Field Notes. *I also asked him if he would let his mother read the story. When I asked Darrien what his mother thought about the story, he told me that he thought she was surprised at what he was involved with in Chicago. I was surprised and pleased to learn in August 2000 that I would be teaching eleventh grade English and that Darrien would be in my third block class.*

References

Atwell, Nancie. 1998. *In the Middle.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. 1990. *Living Between the Lines.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Daniels, Harvey, and Steven Zemelman. 1988. *A Community of Writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kutz, Eleanor, and Hephzibah Roskelly. 1991. *An Unquiet Pedagogy: Transforming Practice in the English Classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Beth Halbert is a teacher-consultant with the West Tennessee Writing Project at the University of Tennessee at Martin. She teaches English at Mt. Juliet High School in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee.

Reprinted with permission from the Fall 2000 issue of *Field Notes*, the newsletter for the West Tennessee Writing Project at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

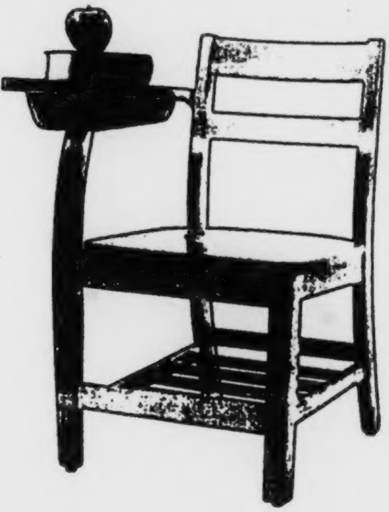
Saving a Seat for Joseph

MARIA RUSSELL

After class, I walk up to Joseph; it is then I realize that everyday he stays a little after the bell rings. I touch him on the arm of his puffy blue jacket and thank him for being so honest. That sounds insignificant, I think. So I tell him what I really mean.

Thirty-five chairs—one empty. This is my classroom. Every day in the first weeks of school, I place the students, like onions, on a cutting board. I slowly peel away the skins they grow to protect themselves from the outside world. I am human to them, and they glance their humanity in my direction every now and then—which is all I ask. I know them: their peculiarities, bruised romances, driving records, work habits, warped fashion sense, hobbies. We have morphed into a cohesive clump that advances in the name of education. This is learning.

Weeks into the term, the door opens. Blue Puffy Coat walks in and hands me his transfer paper: Joseph Smith, student #435800, English transfer grade D-. (Oh, great!) I resent the fact that he is crowding my already crowded classroom. He smiles that uneasy "I'm the new kid" smile. I ignore it and tell him to sit in the empty chair . . . back there . . . next to Just Got Her Tongue Pierced. I resume educating. He is my stepchild student, dispatched to the background because he didn't start from "Go."



I see him out of the corner of my eye making conversation with Just Got Her Tongue Pierced, and I look at him, daring him to interact more. Two weeks pass, as does part two of *To Kill A Mockingbird.* There he sits where I left him, like a forgotten puppy.

As we read, I become the novel's protagonist. I am Atticus *la femme,* condemning injustice, trouncing societal bias, and postulating about the existence of a world without boundaries. Joseph fails the final. After all, he came in at the start of part two. Still, I am disturbed that I somehow let him down.

Every day he wears the same puffy blue jacket. At times when I look at him, his parceled 2.5 minutes, he reminds me of puppies passersby view in a pet store window. That is Joseph's face. He has sad eyes, the ones teachers learn to recognize. Eyes that have seen heartache and sadness; eyes that measure happiness by the spoonful, always mindful to save some for later.

I put him near the front of the class. I begin to pay attention, and so does he. We start a new piece of literature: *A Raisin in the Sun.*

I talk about dreams and hanging on to them. I talk about dreams and how important they are and what true dreams are. Students talk about the statement "a dream come true." We read poetry: Langston Hughes, Gary Soto, and Pablo Neruda. We talk about the dreams of a mother, a father, a child. I give them an assignment: "Write five things that you dream for yourself; bring them in tomorrow."

The Day the Assignment Is Due

"Take out your papers where your dreams are written. Look at them closely. Consider them carefully and . . . select one. The most important one."

This is a risky assignment. Yet, it has always worked. Because dreams are ethereal, they can crumble when someone laughs or ridicules. I emphasize the cruelty of shattering someone's dream for the future. When I am sufficiently certain we are all unmasked, we begin to reveal our individual dreams.

Brian says he hopes to be a good father to his future children. (He is struggling with whether or not to give up his child for adoption; being a teenage father is killing him.) The room is quiet. Cynthia wants to be an English teacher. (She is beautiful, misses two to three days of school a week to care for her younger brothers and sisters, and still manages to hang on to a solid B.) They are all listening. Jameson wants to be drug free. (This is a battle he has fought before.) No one laughs. Heather wants to have a happy marriage. They smile. Another happy marriage. "To never know divorce," says one. Faces wince, heads nod, and eyes look down. Many know this heartache. "To find my one true love," utters another. And then there's Joseph. The room is quiet. The stillness pays homage to the purity of their willingness to be open and honest.

Joseph hesitates, contemplating the enormity of his dream. He only has one line written on his notecard: "I want to know what it's like to have a mother and a father and to have a place to call home. I've never had that." Lightening-bolt words burn my ears and brand my heart. The electricity of his words sucks all the oxygen out of the room. No one breathes. The student called "teacher" swallows hard. I am raw from Joseph's whipping of innocent sincerity. My eyes sting. Everyone else's words after that, although worthy of merit, swirl like feathers around the dove perched in the middle of the classroom. A dove whose name is Joseph.

After class, I walk up to Joseph; it is then I realize that every day he stays a little after the bell rings. I touch him on the arm of his puffy blue jacket and thank him for being so honest. That sounds insignificant, I think. So I tell him what I really mean.

I explain to him that he was the teacher that day. I ask him if he realizes how many people he impacted with his truthfulness. I ask him if he felt the pause in the room after he spoke. "Yea," he responds and looks down, spooning a little into his happiness-for-later jar. I explain that the pause was everyone committing to memory something important, something they want to remember, something they have to remember.

Joseph passes the final on *Raisin.* He participates in groups. He is accepted and respected. He still lingers after the bell rings every day. He comes to say good-bye on the last day of school.

My lesson? I learned that I, too, like an onion, need to peel away my own protective layers. I justify that layers exist for survival. As much as they protect me as a teacher, they insulate me. They make me inflexible—not a good thing in the teaching profession. My eyes see what was once invisible. Joseph helped me see. Humbled with new knowledge and new eyes, I now keep an empty seat in the *front* of the classroom.

I imagine that my classroom was a little bit of home for Joseph, although in reality it fell far short of what he dreamed about. That was two years ago. Last year, I went into the counseling office and asked to see his class schedule. I wanted to say hello, welcome back, and how was your summer.

He didn't go to my high school any longer. I still feel the turbulence in my heart.

Maria Russell is a teacher-consultant with the Area 3 Writing Project at the University of California, Davis. She teaches English, film as literature, and readers' theater at Sheldon High School in Sacramento.

Editors' Notebook

Where Is the Truth in Virtual Reality?

Roxanne Barber

Last fall, *The Quarterly* received an email from Ian Goddard, the webmaster of an Internet site that purports to shed light on conspiracies, cover-ups, and other government shenanigans. In the email, Goddard asked that we correct "grossly false information" contained in an article that appeared in our journal. The summer 1998 article to which Goddard refers, "Virtual Reality: Evaluating Online Information," by Holly Littlefield, describes Littlefield's efforts to help her students evaluate the validity and accuracy of Web sites they use as sources of information for research.

It was the second paragraph of Goddard's letter that caught my eye: "Littlefield claims that my Web site contains information about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots. My site has NEVER contained any information on either alien abductions or JFK assassination plots. I don't even hold much of an opinion on those subjects. *The Quarterly* should publish a correction."

I dropped what I was doing and went to look up the article in question, which now, two years later, I only vaguely recalled. Since when, I wondered, had we been publishing articles worthy of plot ideas for the *X-Files*?

As it turns out, Goddard's Web site was a passing reference in Littlefield's article, a reference that focused not on assassination plots and aliens but on Goddard's claims regarding the crash of TWA Flight 800 in the summer of 1996. Littlefield wanted to make the point that "students are not the only ones duped into believing Internet hoaxes." To support this claim, she discussed the much publicized case of the "well-respected" journalist Pierre Salinger, who reported in the fall of 1996 that TWA Flight 800 had been shot down by U.S. Navy missiles, a claim supported by "government documents" in his possession. After a national stir, news reports revealed that the source of the "government" information was Ian Goddard's Web site. And as Goddard admits—and anyone who visits his Web site can verify—he does have an elaborately documented theory about Navy missiles shooting down TWA Fight 800.

Littlefield called Goddard "an unreliable conspiracy monger," and mentioned that she'd seen theories about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots at his Web site. Littlefield also wrote that Goddard later admitted in a written statement to CNN regarding the TWA Flight 800 theory that he had "made-up all the information because he wanted to give the government a black eye."

In his letter to *The Quarterly*, Goddard disputes Littlefield's statement. He says he never made up the information. "What I did say was that I was sorry for pointing a finger at the Navy, which is not the same thing as saying I fabricated the information."

Goddard, then, is questioning Littlefield's account on two points. First, does his site include information, as Littlefield claims it does, about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots? And secondly, did Goddard admit that he made up the information with regard to Flight 800? On the first point, Goddard is willing to cut Littlefield a little slack. "It's most likely that your journal's claim that my Web site has material that it never has had was a confusion that another site hosting my writing was my site, which is not an uncommon error, and I'd not hold it against anyone, except in this case, as a result, I'm attributed as author of material that is not my own. . . ."

When I contacted Littlefield to ask her to comment on Goddard's claims, she acknowledged that she could not absolutely confirm that the site she'd visited was Goddard's. And she had no record of the Web address she had visited three years ago when writing the article. She admitted that it could have been another site. If it did come from another site, Littlefield recognized the irony of falling into the trap she had been coaching her students to avoid: assuming the accuracy of information found on the Internet.

In answer to Goddard's second point, that he, in fact, had not stated that he made up this information regarding Flight 800, Littlefield forwarded to us the two newspaper pieces that had been her sources, one from the Cox News Service and the other from the *New York Times*. The issue now became whether we were to believe her sources. It may be foolish to challenge the reliability of the *New York Times*, but my own experience has given me reason to wonder. While I was in journalism school in the 1980s, I was writing an in-depth article on the work of a Bay Area organization that provided relief services to El Salvador during that country's civil war. I'd spent several hours interviewing two relief workers in person, both of whom had returned to San Francisco from El Salvador a few days earlier. They'd graciously agreed to the interviews, even though I told them I was writing strictly for a class project and not for publication.

A few days after the interviews were completed, I was working frantically to finish my 5,000-word story by the next day's deadline when, on my way to get my fourth cappuccino of the day, I picked up a copy of the *New York Times*. There on the front page was a story about a protest march that had occurred earlier that week in San Salvador, El Salvador's capital city—the same march that I had just written about in my own article! I congratulated myself on my journalistic acumen, having nearly "scooped" the *New York Times* with my article. Never mind that my piece was still sitting unfinished on my computer screen and would never be published. But as I read the *New York Times* article, I realized that it was a quite different version of the same story. It appeared to downplay recent events connected to U.S. involvement there, and as I read, I realized that my source had given me a very different perspective. I knew that neither version was necessarily the "correct" one but that our different sources had experienced the events in very different ways. It was an enlightening moment in my early journalism career, and I've never again assumed that newspapers are unquestionably accurate or objective, not even the *New York Times*.

Complicating the issue around the accuracy of Littlefield's sources is the fact that the pieces were not strictly news accounts. The *New York Times* piece was an editorial and the Cox News Service piece was written by a columnist. The editorial says that Goddard admitted that he "*invented* the tale to give the government a black eye," whereas the column says "he *pursued and promoted* his claim to give the government a black eye." The difference in these two phrases leaves quite a bit of room for interpretation. Cox News Service writer Howard Kleinberg muddies the waters further, questioning whether Goddard even exists. "That settles it! If it happened on the Internet, I won't believe it. Someone's going to have to prove to me that anything on the Internet is true, even the baseball scores and weather report. It's all because of Ian Goddard, and people like him. If there is an Ian Goddard. I don't know whom or what to believe any more," Kleinberg wrote.

As Littlefield advised in her article, teachers should "get students to question their sources, to realize that every writer has some bias, that every story has another side or two or three, and that many sources may have hidden—and not so hidden—agendas."

After our phone conversation, Littlefield contemplated the issue and responded in an email, "The irony of this situation is certainly not lost on me. While I was writing an article about helping students to evaluate and determine the veracity and authenticity of the information they find on Web sites, I myself may have been duped. Hmm, if nothing else, this certainly gives me a humbling example to use in my own classes." Just like a writing project teacher to turn her mistake, if that's what it was, into an opportunity to enhance her students' learning.

If anything, the experience only strengthens the point of Littlefield's article. It is impossible to counter Goddard's assertion that his Web site never contained information about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots. Unlike books, newspapers, or other printed sources of information, Web sites can change from month to month, even day to day. Without the printed word in hand, there is no way to verify that it was ever published.

For several days after receiving Goddard's letter, we struggled to either corroborate or refute his claims, and we finally had to admit we would be able to do neither. Instead, we decided, unlike Howard Kleinberg, to grant that Ian Goddard in fact does exist, then to tell the story, and finally, to let our readers decide.

Roxanne Barber, a former journalist, is director of communications for the National Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley.

If you have an interesting story about how access to the Internet has challenged your teaching practice or changed the way your students approach their work, we'd like to hear it.

Please contact:

Quarterly Editors
National Writing Project
University of California
615 University Hall
Berkeley, CA 94710-1040
email: *editors@writingproject.org*

Letters

I feel compelled to answer Stan Raines' letter (Fall 2000) in response to Kevin Lavey's article "Student Slayer: The Imposed Curriculum" in *The Quarterly* (Summer 2000). First of all, Mr. Raines, I will try not to make unfounded assumptions about your personal effectiveness as a teacher as you for some reason felt so qualified to do to Kevin Lavey.

However, I am curious as to your experience in an inner-city setting or your familiarity with the Baltimore City Curriculum. I do have some personal knowledge of Baltimore's imposed curriculum. I am in agreement with Mr. Lavey's eloquent statement, "The imposed curriculum defies or at least disrupts relationships between students and material because there is no logical basis for a relationship."

When I see teachers mandated to use the poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee," by Robert W. Service, in our sixth grade classrooms, I wonder if they would not have greater success with poems like "in the inner city" by Lucille Clifton? But how can a teacher in Baltimore City stray from this directed timeline of instruction that dictates what story you will teach, how many days you will spend teaching it, and what skills you will cover? You will then follow this "instruction" with a mandatory test created by the publisher, and you will then turn the scores into the city office.

In his book *Becoming Political,* Patrick Shannon refers to this trend in reliance on commercially produced programs as "reification: the treatment of an abstraction as a concrete object or an immutable procedure." He states that, "... it seems that school personnel reified reading instruction as commercial reading materials because, rather than engaging in many of the possible ways of teaching reading, school personnel relied on only one method—the application of commercial materials" (189). This is what we see happening in response to the standards movement—an attempt to not only standardize curriculum, but to standardize instruction by making sure that every teacher is on the same page at the same time and saying the same thing. This completely takes the student out of the curriculum. And the creativity out of teaching.

Being a teacher of writing, Mr. Raines, I assume that you understand the importance of voice in student writing. I assume that you understand the necessity of a writer having a connection with what he is writing about. In an imposed curriculum, these connections are not valued. John Gaughan writes about this issue in his book *Cultural Reflections.* After showing the film *Hairpiece: A Film for Nappy-Headed People* (Chenzira 1985), Melanie told Mr. Gaughan, "'That's the first time I ever saw anything in school that was just for me.'" Mr. Gaughan continues with his personal reflection, stating that, "Her declaration caught me off guard. I wanted students to consider how media shapes their identities, how women are objectified. How society compels them to achieve a certain look.... Melanie recognized all of this. But the first thing she voiced when *Hairpiece* ended taught me a lesson I hope I never forget: students' presence in school must constantly be affirmed" (17). This is the same message we hear from Mr. Lavey.

Linda Christensen states in her book, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up,* "I want to be clear: Bringing student issues into the room does not mean giving up teaching the core ideas and skills of the class; it means using the energy of their connections to drive us through content" (5). We as teachers need the power to bring literature into our classrooms that speaks to our children, that invites them to make those connections. Gloria Ladson-Billings further reminds us in her book *Dreamkeepers:*

> *The notion of equity as sameness only makes sense when all students are exactly the same. But even within the nuclear family children born from the same parents are not exactly the same. Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably. The same is true in the classroom. If teachers pretend not to see students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs (33).*

What do you think?

We'd like to know your thoughts about the articles you read in *The Quarterly.* Address your letter to Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 615 University Hall, Berkeley, CA 94710-1040, or send email to *editors@writingproject.org* with "Letter to the Editor" as your subject line. We'd love to hear from you.

The issue is greater than pointing a finger, Mr. Raines. You believe the teacher is the problem. Mr. Lavey and I believe we need to look at who is in control of what is happening in education. Who is behind this standards movement? Who is driving these imposed curriculums? Who is creating these commercial products that schools are mandating? If we look closely at these questions, it is quite evident that many teachers feel little control over what happens in their classrooms.

We need to listen to the voices like Mr. Lavey's. We need to hear what the teachers have to say. They are the ones with the direct line to our students. And they are the ones with the least say in what happens with our children. The "whining" you accuse Mr. Lavey of is his voice. His experience. Your unwillingness to hear what he is saying is part of the problem we will continue to have in education. Until people are ready to listen, our kids will continue to see school as a place that has nothing to do with who they are.

And by the way, just to let you know, Mr. Raines, your guessing is quite incorrect about Mr. Lavey's approach that you so snidely assume is "bellyaching in the teacher's lounge and well-chosen snidities at workshops." Mr. Lavey is inquisitive and dedicated to finding what will work for his kids in a system that is controlled from the top down. We need more teachers like Mr. Lavey who are willing to challenge curriculums that do not meet the needs of our children.

Jennifer Drake
Baltimore, Maryland

References

Christensen, Linda. 2000. *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.

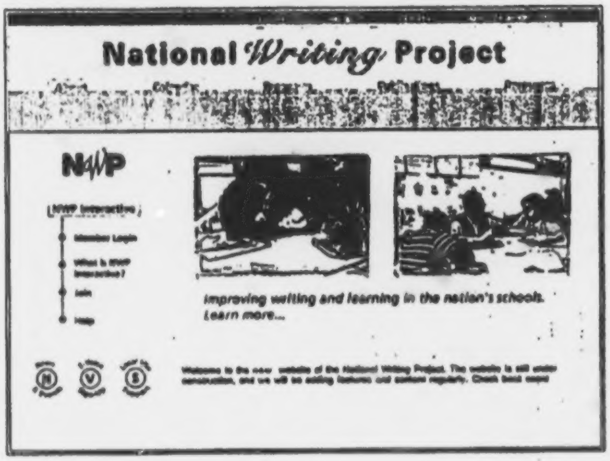
Gaughan, John. 1997. *Cultural Reflections*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Ladson-Billings. 1994. *Dreamkeepers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Shannon, Patrick. 1992. *Becoming Political: Readings and Writings in the Politics of Literacy Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Information at Your Fingertips

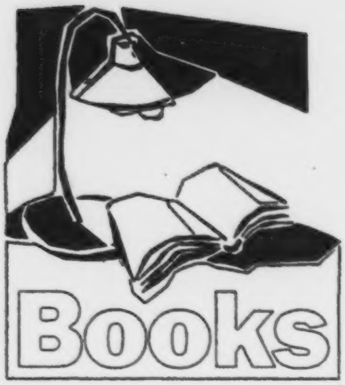
NWP's new Web site puts vital information at your fingertips. With an attractive new design and an improved layout, the Web site is accessible and easy to navigate. New features and activities will keep you in touch with NWP and up to date on the latest issues in education.


National Writing Project
NWP
improving writing and learning in the nation's schools. Learn more...

Visit us online to:
→ read *The Voice*
→ keep up with coming events and late-breaking news affecting NWP
→ join the NWP community in new online discussions
→ link to other writing project Web sites throughout the country.

Come visit NWP online at www.writingproject.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



Winning Ways of Coaching Writing: A Practical Guide for Teaching Writing, Grades 6–12

by Mary L. Warner

REVIEWED BY JIM ADDISON

Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing

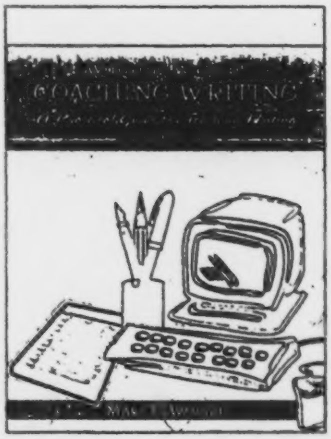
by Harry Noden

REVIEWED BY BOB INGALLS

Winning Ways of Coaching Writing: A Practical Guide for Teaching Writing, Grades 6–12

Edited by Mary L. Warner. Allyn and Bacon, 2000. $40.00; 238 pages. ISBN 0-205-30851-1.

Written for teachers by teachers, *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing* provides a balance between traditional concerns of writing teachers—how to teach grammar, for example—and more current and pressing problems, like how to teach English as a second language (ESL) students and how to address the all-too-real issue of state-mandated writing tests. More practical and hands-on than many texts written for teachers of writing, this book fills a real need for a user-friendly, pragmatic text whose chapters include lesson plans, replicable activities, rubrics, and numerous examples.



Choosing "coaching" as its dominant metaphor, *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing* replicates the underlying philosophy of the National Writing Project—that is, "teachers teaching teachers." Given Warner's experience with the Dakota Writing Project (Warner is a 1995 fellow of their summer institute), this is a natural consequence. Warner defines coaching, in part, by clarifying what it isn't: coaching isn't judging, and it isn't prescribing or healing. It's a way of proceeding, much like it is in the athletic arena, where the coach redirects, encourages, and guides. The book, directed at an audience of middle and high school teachers, both inservice and preservice, aims to "meet a need for teachers of writing to talk with new teachers of writing or to other colleagues out in the field who are struggling with real writing issues" (viii). In this way, older, more experienced teachers "talk" with preservice or less-experienced inservice teachers, telling their stories, giving their first-person accounts, relating their teaching histories. And the result is a comfortable dialogue between colleagues, a one-on-one with a fellow teacher who has struggled with the same issues and problems that you currently struggle with.

Notable features of *Winning Ways of Coaching Writing* include: (1) the consistently developed metaphor of the teacher as coach, the teacher as continually guiding or shaping the writer's activity, giving it clarity and focus; (2) the samples of student writing sprinkled throughout many of the chapters; (3) the brief case studies and classroom scenarios found in a number of places; (4) the first-person accounts of the writing, teaching, and cognitive processes of both teachers and learners; (5) useful, practical annotated resources for teaching with technology and Internet resources for the teaching of writing; and (6) the "collegial journal" concept developed in chapter12, which seeks to facilitate communication between student teachers and mentors and between teachers within and across disciplines.

Organized around the way issues and topics arise for classroom and preservice teachers, the text addresses, through its various contributors, what Leila Christenbury, in her foreword, calls "a wide variety of strategies and approaches, including the use of interdisciplinary writing, writing to learn, and multigenre writing, and can involve journals, creative dramatics, and the reading and example of literature" (xviii).

Chapter 1, "The Philosopher's Stone: Writing and the Humanities," by Stephen Tchudi, alchemically blends a philosophical, theoretical view of writing with its practical application. Through the touchstone of writing, base learning is turned to gold.

Chapter 2, "Thesis, Thinking, and Tying Together," by Mary Warner, outlines and clarifies basic components of writing that beginning writers need to know. An intriguing idea gleaned from Warner's work with the Dakota Writing Project is the "write-around" and its high-tech equivalent "computer-hopping," both of which aid in topic selection and clarification.

In chapter 3, "Audience and Voice," Kathryn Klintworth, a teacher with twenty-five years of experience in elementary, junior high, high school, and college teaching, maps out strategies that encourage students to find their own, unique voices and to share their writing with real, identifiable audiences.

Mark Honegger, a linguist and ESL instructor, examines two approaches to teaching grammar in chapter 4 and looks at the practicalities of ESL instruction in chapter 6, "ESL and Dialects in the Writing Classroom." A particular strength of this chapter is its emphasis on how to integrate a few dialectal or ESL students into the larger, non-ESL writing class.

With chapter 5, "Technology: Power Tools for Writers," Nancy Zuercher, longtime director of the Dakota Writing Project, provides a brief but practical guide for integrating technology and writing.

Chapter 7, "Attention Deficiency in the Writing Classroom," addresses a pressing contemporary classroom issue: how to successfully "coach" writers with ADD and ADHD (attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). Ellen Shannon, the chapter's author, is herself a person with attention deficiency, so what she says carries weight. The list of references and resources at the end of the chapter is especially valuable.

Still another contemporary issue is addressed in chapter 8, "Working and Writing with Nontraditional Ninth Graders." Here, Dan Madigan and Deborah Alvarez, both of whom taught secondary English for over fourteen years, lay out workable strategies for reaching the hard-to-reach students—the ones who don't fit the mold, students who aren't going to college and who are uncertain of their direction.

In chapter 9, "The Reading and Writing Transaction," Carla Verderame, a supervisor (like Mary Warner) of student teachers and placements, uses three quite distinct "texts"—Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," Muriel Sparks' novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and the film *The Dead Poets Society*—to explore literary interpretation and explication. One strategy, reading logs, is particularly useful in getting students ready to write about literature.

With chapter 10, Mary Warner focuses on another, sometimes frustrating, issue facing new teachers of writing in the middle grades and in high school—state-mandated writing tests. She provides two teacher narratives—both by high school teachers in North Carolina—that illuminate the problem of having to "teach to the test" while mapping some strategies that facilitate real learning and writing competency, not simply formulaic response.

With chapter 11, "The Grading Game and the Teaching of Writing," Stephen Tchudi posits "assessment" as a viable alternative to "grading"—something many English teachers dislike as much, perhaps, as state-mandated writing tests. In his discussion of the troublesome issue of evaluating writing, he provides a range of options for the novice or experienced instructor.

The final two chapters of the book are in many ways the most memorable. Chapter 12, "When Coaching Is Teacher to Teacher: The Collegial Journal," by Teresa Berndt and Donna Fisher (practicing middle grades and high school teachers), addresses teachers of writing *as teachers*. Together, the two teachers describe their own powerful discovery of the collegial journal and how it can be used to rekindle and reinvigorate writing teachers who have perhaps neglected themselves in directing all their energies toward their students.

And in the book's final chapter, Stewart Bellman, a retired teacher with thirty-two years of experience, shares his accumulated wisdom about successful ways of coaching writing. Using practical strategies, Bellman emphasizes the teacher writing along with his or her students, and he describes the many benefits that such an open sharing and willingness to be vulnerable provide for the writing classroom. It's a strategy that's perfectly in line with the goals of the National Writing Project and encapsulates the NWP philosophy of "teachers teaching teachers" and of teachers sharing with other teachers to empower themselves and one another.

Jim Addison is director of the Mountain Area Writing Project at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he is a professor of English.

Books

Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing

By Harry Noden. Boynton/Cook, 1999. $25.00; 214 pages.
ISBN 0-867-09466-4

The cause always precedes the effect. This essential principle of physics underlies our perceptions of the world and our lives. Recently, two discoveries changed my view of this. First, a month ago, scientists managed to break the speed of light using a combination of vacuums and chambers. Second, Harry Noden managed to break the "slowness of dark" surrounding the study of grammar.

Image Grammar
Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing
Harry R. Noden

In his book *Image Grammar,* Harry Noden expands the relationship between the parts of speech and writing. He does not deny the existence of the traditional principles: adjectives still modify nouns, and verbs provide the action. He moves beyond these with a combination of vivid writing samples and creative writing exercises that break our limited view of grammar.

"Participles evoke action in a sentence." In the first chapter of *Image Grammar,* Noden shows teachers and students how Anne Rice and Ernest Hemingway, together with four eighth grade writers, create tension and action with participial phrases. In chapter 3, we learn how "parallel structure creates an echo and a drumbeat." Examples include Rod Serling's eerie opening lines of *The Twilight Zone* and sentences from Peter Benchley's *Jaws* and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." Yet most of the examples are from eighth grade writers in Noden's own classroom.

The basic purpose of the book is to show how a writer uses grammatical structures like an artist uses a paint palette. Noden explains:

> *Grammar is the secret muse of all expression, the portrait painter of life's emotions. It allows us to feel the touch of a lover's hand on a bridge in Madison County and hear the cracking voice of the oldest living confederate widow.*

The first five chapters identify numerous vivid writing techniques, and Noden analyzes their effects on the reader. Each chapter ends with five to eight activities that help students apply "new brush strokes" to their writing and to understand and appreciate various writing styles. These activities vary from writing descriptive paragraphs and poetry to discussing reactions to popular and classical literature.

Noden provides excellent examples throughout his book. Student samples dominate the book. Fortunately, they are middle school student writings, so high school teachers can motivate their students to write as well as eighth graders, and elementary and middle school teachers can reasonably challenge their students. I found these samples especially helpful in encouraging my twelfth grade students to write "golden lines" that I posted on the classroom bulletin board. Since thirteen-year-old students had written such excellent samples throughout the book, my students felt empowered to write better.

A middle school English teacher has obviously written the book because he knows what it takes to interest students. Beyond the wonderful mixture of samples, Noden varies his descriptions and analyses. There is also an intriguing CD-ROM that comes with the book. Pop it into your computer, and you will have quick access to stimulating photos and artwork that will inspire student writing. I did not find as much use for this since I was teaching IB English 12, but I could see a good use for it in a creative writing class as well as other classes.

The last four chapters move beyond the sentence and paragraph level. Noden analyzes the grammar of stories, essays, non-fiction, and revision. I find this section of the book more remote, not directly related to what my students need. In time, I expect to use parts of each of these chapters.

Harry Noden challenges the principle of cause and effect that underlies the traditional view of grammar, which emphasizes that a student becomes an effective writer by first learning grammatical terms and structures. As this book shows us, the effect can come first. Student writers will imitate vivid writing techniques and become wonderfully creative and effective in their writing and later learn what those grammatical structures are.

Image Grammar is a wonderful addition to an English teacher's resource shelf, not only to help teach writing, but also to help us become better writers. This past spring, I convinced my principal to buy one for each English teacher in our department before we left for our summer vacations. Vacationing with grammar—now that is certainly a violation of some law in physics.

Bob Ingalls is a teacher-consultant and a codirector of the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University. He teaches English at Mount Vernon High School in Alexandria, Virginia.

Reprinted with permission from The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project, *September/ October 2000.*

Call for Manuscripts

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and the teaching of writing, as well as engaging reports by writing teachers on the research they conduct in their classrooms. Articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by teachers or researchers that address the following themes:

- Balancing process and product in the classroom
- Exploring connections between writing and reading
- Grounding student writing in community
- Evaluating how a teacher's personal writing practice relates to the teaching of writing
- Examining the impact of educational standards on writing education

If you have an idea for an article addressing one of these themes, or an idea for an article of general interest to writing teachers and researchers, give us a call at 510-642-0976, or send a query letter, draft, or completed manuscript to: *The Quarterly,* National Writing Project, Graduate School of Education, 615 University Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. Please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for complete writer's guidelines.

The Quarterly is a publication of the National Writing Project.

EDITORS:	Amy Bauman	EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:	Richard Sterling
	Art Peterson	CODIRECTORS:	Judy Buchanan
DESIGN AND LAYOUT:	Rebekah Truemper		Elyse Eidman-Aadahl
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR:	Roxanne Barber		Mary Ann Smith
		FINANCE DIRECTOR:	Michel Mathis

Support for this publication is provided to the National Writing Project from the U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

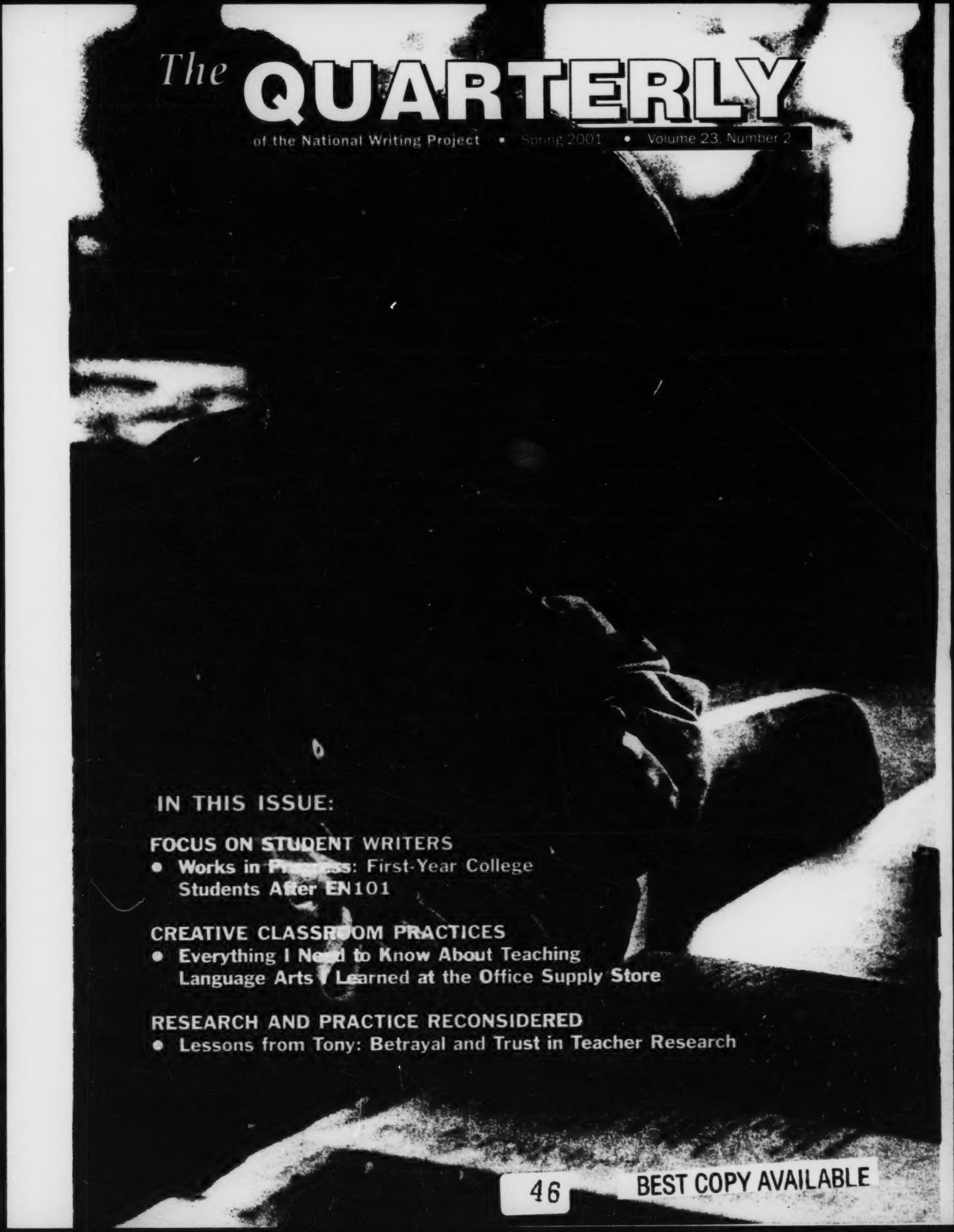
ISSN 08963592

University of California
National Writing Project
615 University Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720-1040

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. postage
PAID
University of
California

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Spring 2001 • Volume 23, Number 2



IN THIS ISSUE:

FOCUS ON STUDENT WRITERS

- **Works in Progress**: First-Year College Students After EN101

CREATIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

- Everything I Need to Know About Teaching Language Arts I Learned at the Office Supply Store

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE RECONSIDERED

- Lessons from Tony: Betrayal and Trust in Teacher Research

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Spring 2001 • Volume 23, Number 2

FOCUS ON STUDENT WRITERS

Works in Progress
First-Year College Students after EN101 — 2
Helen Collins Sitler

Author to Author
How Text Influences Young Writers — 8
Dina Sechio DeCristofaro

CREATIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Everything I Know About Teaching Language Arts I Learned at the Office Supply Store — 13
Kathleen O'Shaughnessy

Using Favorite Songs as Prompts — 19
Michael Fulton

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE RECONSIDERED

Lessons from Tony
Betrayal and Trust in Teacher Research — 23
Sharon K. Miller

The Writing Process Rejected — 30
Orlean R. Anderson

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Telling the Louisiana Story — 34
Charles Larroque

Writing, in French
A Little Background — 34
Ann Dobie

Toward an Urban New York Spanish Curriculum — 35
Nathan Dudley

BOOKS

Reading Reminders
Tools, Tips, and Techniques — 39
by Jim Burke
Reviewed by Jane Braunger

Cover photo by Elizabeth Crews.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Works in Progress

First-Year College Students after EN101

HELEN COLLINS SITLER

In essence, I was asking about the classic concept of transfer: Do students apply anything they learned in College Writing to new contexts that require them to write?

Composition teachers see only works in progress. I don't mean students' papers. I mean the students themselves. They pass through our classrooms, go on to other teachers in numerous disciplines, and only rarely cross our paths again as writers. If I encounter a former student on my university's campus, I always ask, "How are your courses going this semester? Are you doing any writing in them? Are you doing all those good things you know about writing?" Invariably, students respond that their courses are going well, as is their writing. But sometimes, I doubt that I am hearing the whole truth and am left wondering how, indeed, these students approach new writing tasks. I wonder, for instance, whether Jude remembers that Post-it® Notes helped him organize his ideas and if he's used that strategy for his political science paper. I wonder if Julie still highlights verbs to catch her tense shifts, or whether Nathan writes a problematic sentence at the top of a clean sheet of paper and develops his idea from there. In short, I wonder whether my former students remember and actively put to use anything at all from our semester in College Writing.

I know well enough, as all English teachers do, that faculty in other disciplines sometimes question what, exactly, we teach in EN101 College Writing, a required course for every freshman at my university. Faculty complain that students appear to have little or no command of their writing. At such moments, I sigh in frustration, knowing that most of those same students did, in fact, have command of their writing when they produced it in College Writing.

During the 1998-99 academic year, I found an opportunity to act rather than simply sigh and wonder. I was assigned to a small branch campus housing primarily first-year students. If I were to do research using these students, follow-up contacts would be relatively easy. In addition, my colleagues were interested in what a study of this sort might tell us about the underprepared students who are assigned to our branch and about ways we might better teach them. Finally, by undertaking some research, I could discover what kinds of writers my former students were becoming. As works in progress, where were they? And had any elements of my College Writing course helped them to get there?

In spring 1999, I designed a study asking three questions: 1) Do students, in courses other than composition, use the writing strategies they identified as productive for them in College Writing? 2) If conditions students describe as conducive to good writing (peer response, for example) do not exist in their new courses, do they take any steps to create those conditions or to substitute alternative strategies? and 3) If students do not apply previously successful writing strategies, why not?

What I Might Expect to Find

In essence, I was asking about the classic concept of transfer: Do students apply anything they learned in College Writing to new contexts that require them to write? Transfer, defined as "the degree to which a behavior will be repeated in a new situation" (Detterman 4), appears in bleak terms in much of the literature. Comprehensive reviews of transfer studies all "are in almost total agreement that little transfer occurs" (Detterman 8). Composition literature that looks at freshman writers completing writing in other courses mirrors the literature on transfer: little carryover occurs (Chiseri-Strater 141-144, 158; McCarthy 245, 260-263; Nelson 426). In both transfer and composition studies, the problem is the same: few students recognize similarities across contexts. Detterman notes that only when situations are highly similar is transfer even likely to occur (6, 15). Yet classrooms are experienced by students as unique cultures, thus obscuring similarities and effectively derailing students' attempts to discern from their College Writing course what, exactly, they might do to accomplish a writing task in any other course.

Amidst the dismal reports of transfer, however, there have been some rays of hope. Although individual classrooms represent unique discourse sites, studies also reveal that commonalties in writing tasks do exist across courses (McCarthy 243-244; Hillocks 126-132). Hillocks, in fact, argues that a carefully designed first-year writing course can accommodate students' needs for multiple future writing demands (Hillocks 132). Both transfer literature and general literature about learning suggest that when teachers take steps to create particular conditions, students are more likely to transfer their learning. Some of these conditions include direct instruction with connections to life outside the classroom (Jacobson; Sternberg and Frensch 35-36), a master-apprentice model for learning (Geisler 230; Greeno, Moore, and Smith 162; Jacobson; Smith, Understanding 190-191; Soldner), reflective activities (Golub 1-8; Kutz, Groden, and Zamel 13-14; Soldner; Sternberg and Frensch 35-36; Yancey), and an environment that recognizes social influences on learning (Bereiter; Dyson; Smith, Book 9-13). Given such conditions, students can more easily recognize similarities across situations and invoke prior knowledge.

With this research, I felt on firmer ground. My College Writing class was designed to bring life and learning together, we worked in a highly social context, and I routinely wrote along with the students as writer-model. In addition, my fall 1998 students had written short reflections for each of two portfolios and an extensive reflection called their "personal writing handbook" as their final exam. By mid-February of 1999 I had returned all these reflections to the students.

Eleven students from my fall 1998 College Writing sections volunteered to participate in the study. While these participants constitute a small sample, they represent a cross-section of my fall semester enrollees. The volunteers included students from three different fall 1998 College Writing sections. Five commuters and six residential students participated. The group included six females and five males, and it represented a range of writing abilities: three strong writers, five adequate writers, and three weak writers.

After interviewing each of the eleven students (with the help of a graduate research assistant), collecting their papers and records of their conferences in the Writing Center, and interviewing their spring 1999 instructors for courses that assigned writing, I was able to answer the three questions I had posed. Here are the short answers:

1. Do students from EN101 continue to use writing strategies they identified as successful? Yes and no. It depends on the demands of the class.
2. Do they create productive writing environments for themselves? Yes, they work with peer groups, go to the Writing Center, and give themselves adequate time.
3. If they do not apply previously successful strategies, why not? Because these strategies are not necessary for a good grade.

However, as is the nature of qualitative studies, other interesting findings beyond these basic conclusions emerged. What intrigued me was the manner in which students applied the practices they had learned in College Writing to subsequent courses. In general, students relied on three major strategies: verbal strategies, visual strategies, and commitment to process. Their transfer of and variations on processes we used often in College Writing reveal much about first-year writers who are solidly grounded in writing workshop.

Verbal Strategies

> *"When I talk, it helps a lot. I can't just write."—Hilary*

Evidence has long existed that talk serves heuristic purposes. "Exploratory situations" require a use of language that is tentative and in which thoughts are not fully developed. A listener as a sounding board can play a key role (Britton et al. 11). In College Writing, students had worked in peer response groups all semester, both in and outside of class. Karen's peer response group worked so well together that I asked them to videotape themselves, hoping to use the tape to train other peer response groups.

The videotape from fall 1998 reveals Karen as a perceptive listener. For instance, her questions about two peers' papers ("What was that part about the older guy?" and "Could you conduct your surveys every two weeks?") zeroed in on points both writers needed to reconsider in their collaborative field study of a local Walmart. As the weakest writer in her group, however, Karen needed the input of others to isolate the weaknesses in her own paper, a collaborative study with a classmate of the use of space in two selected residence hall rooms. One peer responder pointed out Karen's divergence from the primary goal of her paper: "You're doing use of space, right? It seems like your paper is more compare and contrast … not how each room's using their space." A second responder also pushed for more information, asking whether "one guy touches another guy's stuff" and whether "one girl uses three-fourths of the space in the room." With this prompting, Karen's paper was redirected toward information she had not yet included. She discussed the behaviors the environments in the two rooms encouraged. The talk in her response group helped her redirect the paper's focus beyond a superficial comparison.

In the next semester, with no writing course and very little peer group work in her classes, Karen found other outlets for exploratory talk. She visited the Writing Center twenty-five times, more frequently than any other student on our campus. Nearly all of these occasions revolved around her Introduction to Literature course, which required a great deal of writing that spring. "I go to the Writing Center for everything," she said. The Writing Center, however, was not her only outlet for exploratory talk.

In her residence hall, informal conversations and study groups of literature students sprang up, comprised entirely of students who had been in my College Writing sections the semester before. In one study session, Karen's conversation with a classmate jump-started her work on her essay about Robert Frost's poem "Birches": "The storm [a snowstorm at the time students were reading "Birches"] actually helped me out, and then Cheryl and I ended up talking. We got into stories, recalled some memories, [thought] of things, and then I kind of got going."

James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" proved more formidable. Understanding the reading itself was necessary before any papers could be written. Four students, including Karen and Amy—another student who was part of my study—formed a spontaneous study group. Amy reported, "Either we have in-class [peer groups] or there's a group of us that [gets] together.… Karen, me, Cheryl, and Rayna, we all didn't understand the story so we just got together to do it." Writing about "Sonny's Blues" could proceed after this residence-hall brainstorming session to grasp the story itself. Karen described response meetings of this type continuing throughout the semester. "At dinner we always talk." Karen's transfer of exploratory talk with peers and the Writing Center tutors mirrors the actions of other study participants.

Universally, these students sought out response in a variety of venues. For some students, like Karen, the formalized setting of the Writing Center and, in some cases, the requirement that they go to the Writing Center, opened avenues for talk. Joe, for his work on a literature paper, said, "That's where the Writing Center helped the most. I had two, maybe three people around bouncing ideas off each other.… That really helped a lot."

Response from others was not the only verbal strategy my former students practiced. Some described reading aloud to themselves. Reading aloud had been our approach to peer response in College Writing. So that peers would respond to content and not mechanics, we followed this rule: The writer reads to you; you listen and take notes. Prior to College Writing, few students had read their work aloud. Students learned how such reading helps a writer.

Jenny and Peter took this practice to their new courses. Peter, not referring to any particular paper, remarked, "I usually read [a paper] aloud instead of [silently]. It helps a lot more, I think." He used this strategy primarily to catch grammatical errors. Jenny's read-aloud strategy was more sophisticated. For her literature paper about Adrienne Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," she described reading aloud to monitor coherence. After typing the draft, she said, "Then I go through and read it out loud.… Somewhere in here I had a paragraph that was redundant. I just totally deleted [it] because it was not necessary."

Talk was ubiquitous in students' descriptions of how they managed their writing assignments. Hilary's remark about her own working style represents, to some degree, every student in this study. She said, "If I get stuck, I always talk to somebody."

Visual Strategies

> *"Oh, yeah, my book is all marked up.… I write in the margins a lot."—Mark*

Students' purposes in using talk and visual strategies overlapped in some ways, yet they also diverged. Students used talk primarily for generating, clarifying, and expanding ideas. Some visual strategies also helped with generating ideas, but students depended more heavily on the visual for organizing and editing. All eleven study participants identified visual strategies as part of their writing processes.

During College Writing, we often used color-coding. On some days, for instance, we spent mini-lessons highlighting verbs, pronouns, and punctuation marks to draw attention to mechanics.

Other visual techniques we practiced were intended to develop students' sense of text as flexible rather than immutable. To begin a draft, we sometimes used Post-it Notes. To the prompt "Write everything you know about your topic," students filled Post-its with quickly jotted ideas. Our rule—one idea per Post-it and keep it short—generated as many as twenty to thirty Post-its in three or four minutes of writing. Then, with a partner, students arranged their Post-its into an outline, one infinitely flexible because the Post-its were so easy to move. If plan A for a paper failed, writers could move some Post-its around and try a new draft using plan B.

At other times, often during conferences in my office, a student and I literally cut papers with scissors (always a copy, *never* the original), rearranged sentences and paragraphs, and worked together to write new transitional text to link the rearranged pieces. This hands-on cut and paste signaled to students that they could reorganize while retaining much of what they had already written.

The study participants reported variations on the visual strategies we had used and sometimes combined them with strategies they had learned in other courses.

Jenny described her process of highlighting key words and phrases in the poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" for the paper she wrote. "I had some of the words in boxes or circled, and some of the phrases highlighted. I mainly talked about the words and some of the lines that insinuated [that the husband was controlling]." Amy's strategy for her "Sonny's Blues" essay was similar. She highlighted her textbook in order to focus her concentration and to locate needed information. "I tried to highlight where points were so if I would lose what I was thinking about or somebody distracted me, I could go right back to it."

Other students used brainstormed lists as they had learned to do in College Writing. Victor, writing for political science, developed a list of the points he wanted to include in his analysis of the role of the media in the movie *All the President's Men*. He then moved the items on this list around, adding and deleting points.

He said the "hardest part" of writing the political science paper was "getting it in order." In his final exam reflection for College Writing, Victor had articulated his problem with organizing material: "I was always troubled by how to organize my thoughts. I found the notepad exercise [Post-it Notes] to be a great way to lay my separate ideas down and move them around until I achieved the best setup." In his political science paper, he had used the brainstorm list as if it were Post-it Notes, shifting the order of his ideas to better present his argument.

Once students had drafted, they resorted to other visual techniques. Several described a process of cut and paste, either at the computer or by hand with a printed draft. In an example noted earlier, Jenny described her deletion of an entire paragraph from her "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" piece because of redundancy. She added that she had done "a lot of cut and paste and deleting" while trying to work a personal anecdote into that same paper.

Mark described a similar process of adding and deleting at the computer. His revision of a literature paper was so extensive that the final copy barely resembled the first draft. He reported, "I cut out a big section and I had to make up for that [to meet required word length]. I had to add something to it." In multiple steps, he cut, then pasted in new material, gradually creating his final copy.

During the editing process in College Writing, highlighting helped students catch errors such as tense shift, run-on sentences, and fragments. After College Writing, some students did not physically highlight their papers to accomplish editing but now knew which kinds of errors they were likely to make. Knowing that tense shifts were a recurring problem for her, Maureen searched for such errors in her literature paper, an analysis of two poems. She reported, "I took all the past tense verbs out and put all the present ones in. . . . I just eyeballed it on the computer." In her final exam reflection in College Writing, Maureen had included a paper in which she had highlighted verbs in order to correct numerous tense shift errors; it was a reminder, she said, about tense shift and that she needed to watch for verb errors in other classes.

Commitment to Process

"I didn't do it all in one day."—Peter

Talk proved to be significant for students wrestling with ideas, while visual strategies pushed their papers into finished form. Equally salient in these students' reports was their commitment to their own processes for writing. "All nighters" may be common among college students writing papers; however, this was *not* the case with these eleven student writers. Only rarely did any of these students turn in first-draft, done-in-one-sitting writing. When they did, it tended to occur at the beginning of the semester when students were testing limits of what was acceptable, or late in the semester when they had become bogged down with multiple assignments and close deadlines.

Mark was typical of a student who would test limits and then become overwhelmed. Two early literature papers were returned to him with the instructor's comments "Unsatisfactory. Rewrite." This notation from the instructor quickly clarified that night-before writing was to little avail. Mark did not do this again in his literature class; however, he did write a paper for another class the night before it was due. In this case, he had weighed the demands of two classes and made a choice. "I waited until the last minute [for a health paper]. I was working on a bunch of other things for [literature class]. Too much other stuff." He invested his time in the literature papers, judging correctly that his literature professor would be the more demanding reader.

Students' approach to time management in their spring courses mirrored our procedures from College Writing. Because we worked with portfolios, students at any one time had multiple drafts underway. When portfolio due dates drew close, writers selected their strongest drafts for further work. The notion of keeping multiple works in progress for several weeks was new to most students. Juggling the papers and then self-selecting which ones to complete raised anxieties in the first part of the semester. After the first portfolio, though, students grew accustomed to "multi-tasking." In his final exam reflection, Mark wrote, "For me the only way to write a paper was to have more than one started at a time.... Whenever I got stuck on one paper, I always had another draft to fall back on. At first I was frustrated because I thought I would never finish a paper. Now I am glad I have approached writing that way."

Realistically, first-year students have to learn that assignments for several courses may all fall due within days of each other. Multi-tasking is a skill successful students develop.

Nine of the eleven students spoke of their need for time. Off-task thinking was clearly an important part of their writing processes as they had practiced it in College Writing. About his history paper, Peter said, "I didn't do it all in one day. If I did it all in one day, I never would have been able to do any of this [reorganize ideas and catch grammar errors]. Sometimes I go a week without doing any of it; I just think about it sometimes during the day like maybe when I'm at work.... If you think you have a good idea, you write it down on a piece of paper and come back to it later." He had allowed himself three weeks to complete his three-page paper.

Having read Marica Dickson's essay "Practicing What I Preach" in College Writing, several students referred to Dickson's "not writing process" as part of their own working strategies (204). While apparently not working on their writing, they, in fact, were. "I always get my bowl of ice cream and sit down in front of my computer and start typing," Hilary revealed.

Although multiple drafts, off-task thinking, and not writing were strategies encountered in College Writing, these techniques were only sparsely built into literature courses and not at all in any others. Students took management of this aspect of their writing as their own responsibility.

Findings

I believe my study reveals that, in the case of these particular students, transfer occurred. When course structures failed to support writing processes the students had come to rely on, they found ways to create them for themselves. At the close of the study, one literature instructor commented on one example of this phenomenon. He said, "Your students reproduce peer groups outside of class really well.... It shows there's a kind of conversation going on among themselves that's of a superior quality..." How did this transfer happen? Why, in the face of much research suggesting that transfer seldom occurs, did these College Writing students carry techniques with them to other disciplines?

Perhaps Bereiter's notion of dispositional transfer partially answers that question. In his view, the issue with transfer is not a learner's capability to reproduce particular skills but rather one of developing a disposition to self-create conditions that enabled successful performance of a task in the past. Bereiter maintains that learners who have experienced successful learning will later seek like-minded companions. In so doing, they will recreate an environment that will again foster positive experiences. Rather than transfer specific skills—as many of the studies that report little transfer expect test subjects to do—learners transfer the disposition to reproduce effective learning environments (31).

In their commitment to process, these College Writing students had recreated for themselves an environment that allowed them adequate time to complete writing assignments. With their reliance on both verbal and visual strategies, they appeared to be shuttling back and forth between the social and the individual aspects of writing. Their use of talk was highly social. Visual techniques they employed tended toward the solitary. As writers, they were choosing their moments: sometimes they needed other voices; sometimes self-monitoring was appropriate. Once again, they were reproducing effective learning environments. They had developed the disposition to place themselves in productive learning situations.

The ability to assess what constitutes a productive environment can, I believe, be traced to students' awareness of themselves as writers. We spent the semester demystifying writing by immersing ourselves in the doing of it, reading what others had to say about writing, and articulating our individual working processes. In short, students in College Writing had engaged in Golub's reflective practice of "mak[ing] the invisible visible" (1).

That fall, students learned they could not expect much of first drafts. They discovered that "not writing" is just as important to completing one's work as physically moving pen across page (Dickson 204). They discovered that their own teacher's drafts were numerous, often color-coded, usually cut and pasted, and quite different if readers were to compare any first copy with a final copy. In other words, they discovered that their teacher and professional writers, the supposed experts, have exactly the same struggles and anxieties as first-year college students. By semester's end, students could articulate their own working processes, identifying which were effective and which were not.

Did students write only "A" papers in their spring 1999 courses? No. Mark discovered quickly that a weak effort would be unacceptable in his literature class. His revisions, entailing significant work and investment on his part, did reap the rewards of A's and B's. Papers in some other courses were, in my opinion, unacceptable as college-level writing. However, the students were savvy about reading their professors and earned above-average grades even on those pieces. Laura explained why she did not always invoke the relatively complex working strategies she had used in College Writing: "The kind of requirement for writing this semester is a lot less than last semester." Joe added, "Professor X is looking for good papers, but with these things [papers in other courses], I basically just get the information down." My College Writing students recognized that "the definition of writing changes" with each course (Anderson et al. 23-24). We had discussed writing not as monolithic but as multifaceted, depending on audience and purpose. To that end, students had composed narratives and persuasive pieces, had conducted short field studies, and had written a paper for an audience outside our classroom. Anderson et al. revealed that learning to adapt one's writing to various contexts was the most valuable and most transferrable aspect of Writing 210 (26-27). It would seem that was also true of my College Writing students.

As works in progress, where were these students? They were students who still needed help. They needed peer input, numerous drafts, and assistance with editing. Considering the venue in which they were working—a branch campus populated primarily by underprepared students—the lack of supporting structures for writing in nearly all of their courses was a source of problems. However, they were also students who exhibited confidence in their ability to complete writing assignments in ways that were acceptable to their professors. In College Writing, they had practiced ways to get inside writing assignments and experience the doing of them. Those internalized processes left my classroom with these students. To their credit, these writers were works in progress with deeply embedded experiential knowledge and the disposition to use it.

Acknowledgments: I extend thanks to the University Senate Research Committee at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Their grant funding made this study possible. The work could not have been completed without the help of Jenny Staben, the doctoral student who assisted with the research. I also acknowledge my colleagues at the Armstrong County Campus (Pennsylvania). Their interest in continuous improvement of one's teaching practice and their participation in the study itself supported my efforts from the proposal stage to completed work. Writers who gathered at the NWP Writing Retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in July 2000 offered their support and assistance. I wish especially to recognize Joe Check, Tom Fox, and Art Peterson for their responses to drafts during and after the retreat.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to the eleven students who participated in this study. Without hesitation, they shared their time, their papers, and their ideas. I am most grateful for what they taught their teacher.

Helen Collins Sitler teaches composition courses in the English Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She serves as co-director of the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project.

References

Anderson, Worth, et al. 1990. "Cross-Curricular Underlife: A Collaborative Report on Ways with Academic Words." *College Composition and Communication* 41: 11-36.

Bereiter, Carl. 1975. "A Dispositional View of Transfer." *Teaching for Transfer: Fostering Generalization in Learning.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Britton, James, et al. 1975. *The Development of Writing Abilities.* New York: Macmillan Education.

Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth. 1991. *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Detterman, Douglas K. 1993. "The Case for the Prosecution: Transfer as an Epiphenomenon." *Transfer on Trial: Intelligence, Cognition, and Instruction.* Edited by Douglas K. Detterman, and Robert J. Sternberg. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

continued on page 12

Author to Author

How Text Influences Young Writers

Dina Sechio DeCristofaro

The writer studies literature. . . . He is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write.

—Annie Dillard

Several months into my exploration of how my fifth grade students' reading was influencing their writing, I conducted a survey. I asked questions like, "Where do you get ideas for your writing?" "Do you ever get ideas from stories you read?" "Have you ever tried to copy a famous author's style?"

More than half of the students commented that they got ideas from reading. Some said ideas came from movies or television, and many were influenced by their friends' ideas.

While students generally agreed that it was okay to get ideas from an author for their writing, I was surprised by several of the responses regarding the question about copying an author's style. To these students, the idea of copying was not acceptable. Simon wrote, "I never cheate." Jack wrote, "That's playgerrisum."

I know that in some way I am responsible for those attitudes. Earlier in the school year, I spent several weeks teaching the process of how to write a research paper for social studies. I had emphasized the importance of paraphrasing when taking notes. I told them not to copy.

Simon and Jack had confused copying, a practice I very much discourage, with a practice I encourage: an immersion in the work of accomplished writers that allows students to assimilate the skills, ideas, and creative direction of these authors either consciously or by osmosis.

Since 1994, when I became involved with the Rhode Island Writing Project, I have been researching the reading/writing connection. Even before this involvement, I knew that I could help students understand such features as story elements and writing strategies through illustrating these elements in the work of professional authors. For instance, after explaining the concept of internal conflict during a writing workshop focus lesson, I might select *Ira Sleeps Over,* a picture book by Bernard Waber. In this story, the protagonist is a young boy who is invited to sleep at his friend's house. He struggles with the question of whether or not to bring his teddy bear with him, afraid his friend will laugh if he does, yet afraid to sleep without the bear. For some time, I had used picture books to provide students with effective examples of writing features such as imagery, characterization, and setting.

Now I wanted to look in a more formal way at the link between the reading my students were exposed to and how they write. What effect, I wondered, did the books students were reading and the stories they were experiencing through read-alouds have on their writing? When I began my research, I suspected I would find that students borrowed topics, used particular words, or emulated what I loosely refer to as author style. After looking at the writing more analytically, I was able to see more clearly a host of connections between the authors' works and the subject, tone, genre, diction, and rhetoric of my students' work.

Subjects

One read-aloud that had an impact on student writing was *Grandad Bill's Song,* by

Jane Yolen. In this moving story, Yolen's protagonist mourns the loss of his grandfather as other family members share their memories of the man as they knew him. Dealing with the loss of a loved one as it does, *Grandad Bill's Song* can be a difficult story to read aloud. The last time I read it, I had to ask a student to finish the reading because I was too choked up to continue. Some of my students experienced the same emotional reaction, and we had a lengthy discussion afterwards about why some of us responded the way we had. We talked about death. We talked about how a good book can make you cry sometimes. It was a powerful literary experience for them and for me. When writing workshop commenced, I did not require students to write on the topic of death and loss. Writing workshop for me is about choice, and I know my students appreciate this crucial element of our writing environment. ("This class is like 'Choose your Own Adventure®!'" Dylan blurted out one day.)

But, without prodding, Anna began "All About My Great Grandpa." Unlike Yolen's story, Anna was reporting not a firsthand experience but a secondhand memory of her great-grandfather's death as it was related by her mother who was ten years old when the man died. When Anna shared that memory, students were moved by her story, and, at the same time, Anna's friend Sheila opted to write about her grandmother who had passed away the previous year. In both of these cases, writing topics were chosen as a direct result of the students' exposure to *Grandad Bill's Song*.

Tone

Another book I selected to read aloud was *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka. Scieszka adopts a tone of irreverent humor to parody the genre of the classic fairy tale. Most students love his approach. As I shared this book, I spotlighted some of the elements of the fairy tale that Scieszka was treating lightly. The book includes stories such as "The Princess and the Bowling Ball" and "The Really Ugly Duckling." The students had previously heard other Scieszka books including "The Frog Prince Continued" and "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs."

That week, again without my intervention, two students began writing tales similar in tone to Scieszka's. Marty started "Chicken Licken Gets Fried," a humorous account of his title character's ill-fated trip to Kentucky. Tammy worked on "The Princess and the Porcupine." I was amused at how the attitude of Scieszka's work was reflected in Tammy's writing:

> *Once upon a time, there was a stupid prince who was looking for a stupid princess. Now he was not just a person who was called names. He was really stupid. He decided that if he wanted a pure princess who was kind, he had to see if she could feel a porcupine through ten mattresses.*
>
> *He found a princess who was kind and loyal, but he needed to do the porcupine test. He found a porcupine, ten mattresses, and told the princess she had to feel the porcupine. Well, that night, the porcupine jumped out from under the mattresses, bit the princess on the butt, and ran away.*
>
> *In the morning, the princess said, "Yeah, I felt the porcupine. He bit me."*
>
> *The princess left and the prince lived unhappily ever after.*

During peer conferences, a few other students became interested in Marty's and Tammy's writing. They asked if they could form a small group and work together. I was beginning to see a pattern that would occur repeatedly as I observed students making connections between reading and writing. The children were being influenced not only by the professional writers they were reading, but also by the writing of their classmates. The short stories that resulted from this venture included "Lucky Ducky and the Four Eggs" "Hippie Locks and The Three Bears," and "The Melted Cheese Man and the Nachos." I was noting something of a chain reaction. Marty and Tammy were inspired by the original stories I read and other students were motivated to similar projects after listening to Marty and Tammy read their creations. In *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Donald Graves suggests that "no distinctions are made between the reading of children's writing and the writing of professionals. Both are treated as important writing" (76). When Marty and Tammy shared their stories aloud, their texts were important enough to inspire their classmates.

Genre and Style

For children, alphabet books are a familiar genre. Most kids experience them in their earliest years, but Jerry Pallotta's books make clear that there are alphabet books and there are alphabet books. His informative texts are colorfully illustrated, with one alphabet letter per page, a structure that is easy for children to imitate. Here are a few excerpts from *The Ocean Alphabet Book* by Pallotta:

> *E is for Eel. Eels are slimy! Eels are long and thin like snakes. If you do not like to hold snakes, then you probably would not like to hold Eels.*
>
> *F is for Fiddler Crab. Most crabs have claws that are the same size. The*

Author to Author

> *Fiddler Crab has one big claw and one tiny claw.*
>
> *We cannot think of any fish whose names begin with the letter X! Can you?*
>
> *Oops, we found one! X is for Xiphias gladius (pronounced—Ziphias). This is the scientific name for Swordfish (Pallotta, 1986).*

Borrowing Pallotta's take on the alphabet genre, Joel wrote "ABC Sports," which includes the following:

> *H is for the Hartford Whalers. The Hartford Whalers are a hockey team, even though they are not very good.*
>
> *Q is for Quarterback. A Quarterback is a position in football. The Quarterback throws passes and hands the ball to the running back.*
>
> *T is for the Texas Rangers. The Texas Rangers are a baseball team in Texas. They are having a heck of a season.*
>
> *X is for the X Cleveland Browns. They are the X Cleveland Browns because they moved to Baltimore.*

Joel illustrated his alphabet book with the help of two classmates. Other alphabet books started popping up: "The Animal Alphabet Book," "The Fruit and Vegetable Alphabet Book," "The ABC Book about School." Were they modeled after Jerry Pallotta's books or Joel's? I believe that both authors influenced the students in my class.

Style, Diction, and Rhetoric

Looking beyond Joel's borrowing of Pallotta's form, I see that Joel also emulates Pallotta's conversational style. Some of his pages, like the one about the quarterback, simply give information, as Pallotta does with his page on the fiddler crab. On another page, Pallotta informs his readers that eels are slimy and that they might not want to hold one. Joel, in a similar fashion, gives his opinion about a particular hockey team (who happened to be having a less-than-perfect year). He later lets us know that the Texas Rangers are "having a heck of a season," and he also has some fun with X, as Jerry Pallotta did in his book. Shelley Harwayne notes that students "frequently choose to borrow language patterns from individual picture books" (298).

Silent Reading Influences Public Writing

I was seeing ways that students, after hearing stories read aloud, are influenced in making decisions about subjects, tone, genre, and style, but much of the reading students do in my class is silent reading in books of their own choosing. I was curious about the effect that reading in this context has on student writing. When A.J., an avid reader, shared his story "The Cry of the Wolf" during a conference, I tried to plum the sources of this sophisticated piece of writing. Here are some paragraphs from A.J.'s work:

> *The young wolf sat on a rock sniffing the wind as it blew across his wet nose. He could pick out the sticky-sweet smell of the Spruce Tree. But the strongest smell was the approaching snow.*
>
> *Without warning one of the pups from his pack knocked him from his rock. A second pup joined the playful fighting and nipped at his fur.*
>
> *The wolf allowed the pups to charge into him. The[y] weighed only forty pounds, much too small to really hurt him. Besides, it was his turn to watch them while their parents rested. Just then, a piercing howl interrupted their playing. Fifty yards away, the alfa male was pacing nervously. Back and forth he went. Suddenly, he stops. His body was stiff, his ears shot forward. He stopped to look at the mountains. Then he raised his head and howled. His mate joined him, their voices blended in an eerie cry up the mountain.*
>
> *The caribou herd, their only source of food, was a gray smudge in the distant light. The caribou had also smelled the snow and were moving to a new feeding ground.*

I discovered that A.J.'s piece was generated by reading, but not a single piece of reading. Graves states that "when information is the classroom focus, and literature is the center of activity, children will work with a broad assortment of reading materials" (67). When I asked A.J. about his process when writing this piece, he told me he had originally become interested in the topic of wolves from a book he had borrowed from the library. After he decided to write this story, he borrowed several more books, some of which he read during reading workshop but most of which he read at home. A.J. also looked for information in *National Geographic*. He read some fiction as well, mostly books by Gary Paulsen, and he had just finished *Call of the Wild* by Jack London. In writing workshop, A.J. was able to dig deeply into his own literary resources in the way Harwayne describes: "[students] need to call upon their own internalized sense of what good writing is and to recall those works that have affected them as readers. They need to form mentor relationships with the writers they admire, trying to do what these writers have done" (154). It is evident that A.J. formed those mentor relationships and also knew where to find information that made his writing more effective.

In an equally challenging endeavor, Sam attempted to write a story like "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen. In "Hatchet," the protagonist, Brian Robeson, flies in a single-engine plane to visit his father. When the pilot has a heart attack and dies, Brian must land the plane and then survive alone in the wilderness. His only aid is a hatchet his mother gave to him before he left. Sam's story, "The Knife," relates the adventure of a boy named James who gets knocked unconscious while walking in the woods with his dog. When he regains consciousness, he realizes he is lost and must survive on his own. Fortunately, James remembers that he has his pocket knife with him.

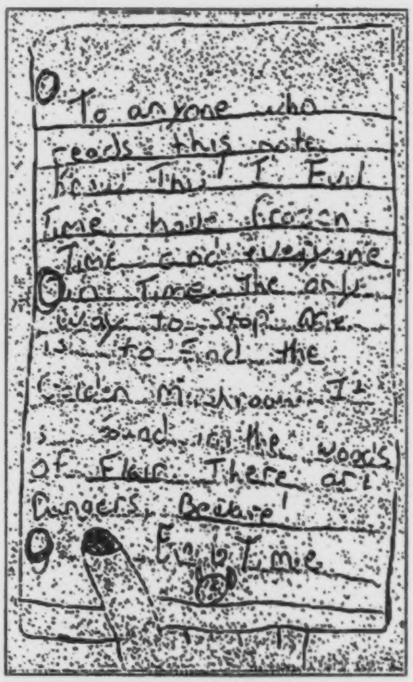
Looking at Sam's writing, I saw obvious similarities to Paulsen's work. Although Sam intentionally set out to write a story like "Hatchet," he was not cognizant of all the parallels between his story and Paulsen's. Here is an excerpt from Sam's piece:

> *Then he sensed what he needed most. Food. He looked at the bushes. What he saw was beautiful. Berries were everywhere. For the next hour James ate as many berries as he could. When he couldn't eat another berry he crawled into his shelter and fell asleep.*

Though not verbatim, the passage reflects Sam's connection to Paulsen's text in several ways. The idea itself is taken directly from "Hatchet." Paulsen writes,

> *The slender branches went up about twenty feet and were heavy, drooping with clusters of bright red berries. They were half as big as grapes but hung like grapes and when Brian saw them, glistening red in the sunlight, he almost yelled.... there was such a hunger in him, such an emptiness, that he could not stop and kept stripping branches and eating berries by the handful, grabbing and jamming them into his mouth and swallowing them pits and all.*

Sam's diction and sentence structure are also reflections of Paulsen's style. The word "shelter," for instance, is used several times in "Hatchet." One-word sentences appear often as well. Paulsen writes, "And now, he thought, if I just had something to eat. Anything." In an earlier scene he writes, "They would find him. Maybe not tomorrow but soon. Soon. Soon." Sam writes, "Then he sensed what he needed most. Food."



To anyone who
reads this note
Know this! I Evil
Time have frozen
time and everyone
in time. The only
way to stop me
is to find the
Golden Mushroom. It
is found in the woods
of Flair. There are
dangers, Beware!
Evil Time

Figure 1. The author's student Tammy uses text within a text in her writing.

Typically in fifth grade, I would be emphasizing the need for students to avoid sentence fragments. I did not teach Sam how a fragment can, in fact, become an effective structure. Gary Paulsen did.

In all the situations I have mentioned, the students were aware, at least on some level, that they were emulating a particular author. When I asked Tammy about where she got her idea for her story "Evil Time," however, she said the idea just came to her. She was not aware of how much her story resembles Avi's *City of Light, City of Dark* until I brought the similarities to her attention during a writing conference. In Avi's book, the characters are in search of a token that will save the people from darkness. Tammy's plot revolves around finding the Golden Mushroom so Time will not be frozen forever. In *City of Light, City of Dark*, a text within a text appears, explaining the treaty between those who hold the power and the people who must search for the token. Tammy also effectively uses a text within a text in her writing, as shown in Figure 1.

Tammy was surprised to see how much her story was like Avi's. I was not. She had read Avi's book twice.

Even though I was becoming increasingly aware of the ways professional writers influence some students' writing, I was also coming to view the whole phenomenon of borrowing as more complicated than I originally had seen it. Why do some students appear to make connections between reading and writing while others do not? Interestingly, both Simon and Jack, the students who considered borrowing as copying and plagiarism, had difficulty reading. As I think about it, I cannot recall having any outstanding writers who were struggling readers. Perhaps this will be a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

topic for further study. I am also curious about how much borrowing was conscious and how much was not. While I strongly believe that students should choose their own writing topics, I wonder if their topics are just as likely to choose them. Student texts are affected by many factors: conversations, teacher modeling, student writing, and, of course, reading. It appears that some students are very much aware of their borrowings. Most, though, are not cognizant of such intertextuality.

As a result of my classroom research, I have strengthened my belief in the reading and writing workshop as an effective model of classroom instruction. When students are immersed in a literature-rich environment, they are exposed to many teachers of writing: the authors I read to them, those they select to read on their own, and the student authors in our classroom. Student writing takes on characteristics of all those authors. According to Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels, "Researchers and teachers are discovering more of the connections between reading and writing. Of course, reading provides specific data and topics for immediate writing projects, but it can do much more than that. At a deeper level, immersion in certain kinds of reading helps all writers assimilate the tone, flavor, structure, norms, and rhetorical strategies of particular genres of writing, a prewriting activity that's no less effective for being osmotic and unconscious. Further, reading helps students identify themselves as fellow writers" (143).

Finally, if writing is so strongly influenced by what students read and by the stories they hear, surrounding children with quality literature should be our first objective. As Graves writes, "All children need literature. Children who are authors need it even more" (67).

References

Avi. 1993. *City of Light, City of Dark.* New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Dillard, Annie. 1989. *The Writing Life.* New York: Harper & Row.

Graves, Donald. 1983. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harwayne, Shelley. 1992. *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

London, Jack. 1960. *Call of the Wild.* Racine, Wisconsin: Whitman Publishing Company.

Paulsen, Gary. 1987. *Hatchet.* New York: Puffin Books.

Pallotta, Jerry. 1986. *The Ocean Alphabet Book.* Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.

Scieszka, Jon. 1992. *The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales.* New York: Viking.

———. 1991. *The Frog Prince Continued.* New York: Viking.

———. 1989. *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs.* New York: Viking.

Waber, Bernard. 1972. *Ira Sleeps Over.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Yolen, Jane. 1994. *Grandad Bill's Song.* New York: Philomel Books.

Zemelman, Steven and Harvey Daniels. 1988. *A Community of Writers: Teaching Writing in the Junior and Senior High School.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dina Sechio DeCristofaro is a co-director of the Rhode Island Writing Project. She teaches fifth grade at Hope Elementary School in Scituate, Rhode Island.

Works in Progress

continued from page 7

Dickson, Marica. "Practicing What I Preach: A Writing Instructor's True Confession." *The Subject Is Writing.* Edited by Wendy Bishop. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Dyson, Anne Haas. 1991. "Transforming Transfer: Unruly Children, Contrary Texts, and the Persistence of the Pedagogical Oder." *Review of Research in Education* Vol. 24: 141-171. Edited by A. Iran-Nejad, and P.D. Pearson. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Geisler, Cheryl. 1994. *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Golub, Jeffrey N. 2000. *Making Learning Happen: Strategies for an Interactive Classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Greeno, James G., Joyce L. Moore, and David R. Smith. 1993. "Transfer of Situated Learning." *Transfer on Trial: Intelligence, Cognition, and Instruction.* Edited by Douglas K. Detterman, and Robert J. Sternberg. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Hillocks, George. 1995. *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Jacobson, Rebecca. 1998. "Teachers Improving Learning Using Metacognition with Self-Monitoring Learning Strategies." *Education* Summer 1998: 579-590. Searchbank. 13 April 1999.

Kutz, Eleanor, Suzy Q. Groden, and Vivian Zamel. 1993. *The Discovery of Competence: Teaching and Learning with Diverse Student Writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Lamott, Anne. 1994. *Bird by Bird.* New York: Doubleday.

McCarthy, Lucille Parkinson. 1987. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writes Across the Curriculum." *Research in the Teaching of English* 21: 233-265.

Nelson, Jennie. 1995. "Reading Classrooms as Texts." *College Composition and Communication* 46: 411-429.

Smith, Frank. 1998. *The Book of Learning and Forgetting.* NY: Teachers College Press.

———. 1988. Understanding Reading. 4th ed. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Soldner, Laura B. 1997. "Self-assessment and the Reflective Reader." *Journal of College Reading and Learning* Fall: 5-11. Searchbank. 13 April 1999.

Sternberg, Robert J., and Peter A. Frensch. 1993. "Mechanisms of Transfer." *Transfer on Trial: Intelligence, Cognition, and Instruction.* Edited by Douglas K. Detterman and Robert J. Sternberg. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. 1998. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom.* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Everything I Know About Teaching Language Arts I Learned at the Office Supply Store

KATHLEEN O'SHAUGHNESSY

In the chaotic real world of the classroom, the tiny things matter. Tiny things make the difference between feeling scattered and lost or competent and in control.

Okay, not everything I know about teaching came from Office Depot. I did pick up a few pointers along the way from the likes of Linda Rief, Regie Routman, and Nanci Atwell. Those have been the big ideas, the theoretical frameworks I've internalized, ideas which shape my teaching in ways I'm hardly aware of anymore. But in the chaotic real world of the classroom, the tiny things matter. Tiny things make the difference between feeling scattered and lost or competent and in control. And many of the tiny things that prop me up in my classroom have come from the aisles of my local office supply store, where I can be found on many Sunday afternoons discovering some gizmo I never knew existed but now can't live without.

Don't You Wish You'd Invented Post-it® Notes?

Every year, I ask each section of middle school students I teach to bring in one supply to add to the community pile that all classes will share throughout the year. These treasures may include the usual project-making supplies like markers, glue, and construction paper, but I always ask the largest class to bring in packs of three-by-three-inch Post-it® Notes. We use them almost daily.

Powerlines. We use Post-it Notes to tag short passages of effective description. A colleague of mine has coined the word "powerlines" for these. They may be similes, metaphors, or just good writing that is chock full of vivid images. During whole-class mini-lessons, I train students to spot these lines, stopping while reading aloud to point them out and reread them. A powerline is more easily illustrated than defined. Christopher Paul Curtis is one author who provides plenty of powerlines, like these from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham,* which I read to the class.

The "official juvenile delinquent," Byron, has just thrown a cookie at a bird on a telephone wire and Kenny, the narrator, says, "The cookie popped the bird smack-jab in the chest! The bird's wings both stuck out to the side and for a hot second with its tail hanging down and its wings stuck out like that it looked like a perfect small letter *t* stuck up on the telephone wire." At these words, most of the boys in my class laughed, and most of the girls squirmed, one protesting, "Aw, that's mean." I pointed out that we must have a powerline here because a characteristic of a powerline is the ability to move a reader with a clear mental image. All admitted they had been moved by this image. I read on: "When I got to Byron he'd picked up the bird and was holding it in his hands. The bird's head drooped backward and was rolling from side to side. Dead as a donut." More laughs, more protests, and at least one, "Hey, that's another powerline!"

Once students begin to recognize powerlines in our shared reading, I send them searching in their independent reading material for samples of their own. When they find one, they mark it with a Post-it Note and keep reading. Later, they copy the powerline, the source, and the page number onto an index card (Office Depot again) to turn in for a grade. These are posted on a bulletin board for a while where students can borrow them for inspiration. Students' writing improves as they become aware of the tricks that authors use to add engaging detail and imagery to their work. I've seen my students using powerlines in their own writing after turning in just one or two cards. In one set of personal narratives from early in the school year, I found dozens. Some sounded very much like eighth-graders:

> *"You could feel the hot wind blowing against your face like a hair dryer blowing on medium."*

> *"You could hear the waves crashing against the beach like a car crash."*

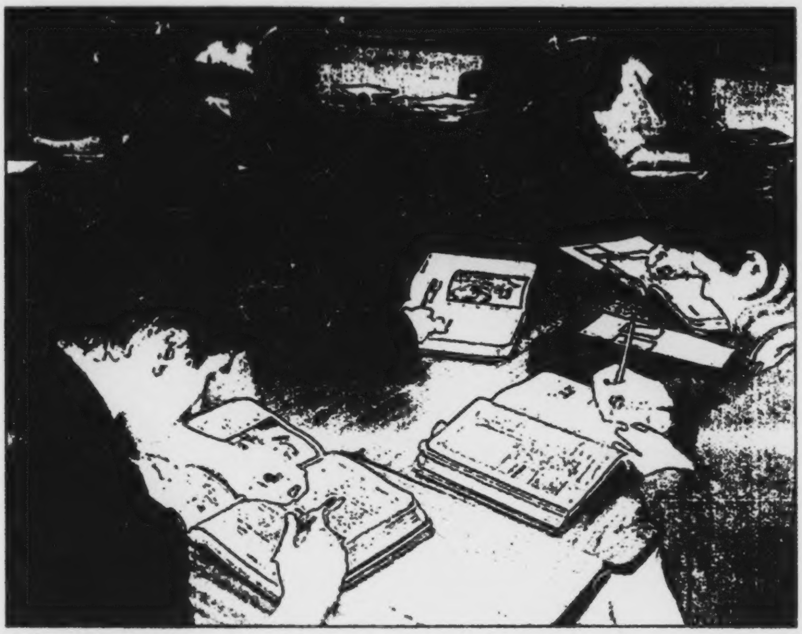
But others were startling to me in their originality and in the strength of the language:

> *"My line zoomed out like a dog chasing a mailman."*

> *"From around the corner came a nondescript white truck like a huge beast lumbering out of its cave."*

> *"I saw [my brother's] spider monkey body fly into the air and hit the ground with a thump."*

> *"She was curled up like a rosebud, her back to me."*



O'Shaughnessy's students use Post-it® Notes as tools to help them in their reading.

I was so delighted with my harvest of student-generated powerlines that I typed them up and attached each to a separate index card. For our next writing workshop, I had students sort through the cards and choose a powerline to use as a first sentence in a piece of fiction. This gave me the pleasure of reading an entire set of students' stories without a single "Hi, my name is . . . and this is a story about . . ." first sentence, and the momentum of a powerful first sentence seemed to energize their pieces. The stories they produced were much more lively and detailed than previous attempts, and they yielded a fresh crop of powerlines to read aloud and celebrate.

Vocabulary. My students also use Post-its to mark new or interesting vocabulary words as they read independently. There's nothing new about asking students to fish out new vocabulary in their reading. But the Post-it allows them to forge ahead in the text without committing the sin of marking up a book. Later, they copy from the text the sentence in which they encountered the word, the title of the source, and the page number, adding a definition in their own words and an illustration or example when appropriate. For *disheveled,* Jenna wrote, "When Coach doesn't give us enough time to dress in, I end up disheveled because I can't get dressed and do my hair in two minutes!" Brian made a card for *dog-eared,* "Don't dog-ear your class novel because Ms. O. doesn't like it when you mess up her books." This was accompanied by a drawing of an open book with arrows pointing to the turned-down corners of the pages. Vocabulary cards are also posted on a bulletin board for a while; then the students who wrote them get their cards back to add to personal word banks in their binders.

Peer response. Post-it Notes also make it easier to put into action Peter Elbow's reflective feedback technique, "telling." Telling requires responders to describe their reactions as they read. Telling and other Elbow strategies tend to make students' feedback more useful than the usual, "I liked it; it was good" that I heard regularly back in the days when I didn't direct student responses. I've found that when I require a written response on a Post-it instead of merely allowing students to respond verbally, the responders take their duties more seriously and, with practice, the quality of their remarks improves. So, for instance, Sean demonstrates the telling technique with this: "While I was reading your piece, I felt like I was riding a rollercoaster. It started out kinda slow, but you could tell there was something exciting coming up. But then it moved real fast and stopped all of a sudden. I almost needed to read it again the way you ride a rollercoaster over again because it goes by too fast." This response is certainly more useful to the writer than the usual, "I think you could like, add some more details, you know?" that I often overheard in response meetings.

Writers as well as responders make use of Post-its. I often ask the author of a piece to attach specific questions about the draft. We do this to prepare for a "blind conference" in which students use pseudonyms to identify their drafts. I give the piece to a responder in a different class. This is my attempt to remedy the circumstances in which students who work together every day are sometimes uncomfortable giving what might be seen by the author as negative feedback, or in other cases, giving, because of personal feelings about the author, nothing but negative feedback. Blind conferences create a level of objectivity that might not exist in face-to-face meetings and provide a more genuine experience of writing for an audience, since most of us don't know all of our readers personally.

Typically, a draft will get handed around to several readers, and the author will get more than one answer to each Post-it Note question. One writer, working under the pseudonym Orange Banana, asked, "Do I have a good attention grabber here?" and got four responses. Three were generic: "It's okay," "No. Be more specific," and "Yeah, it was good." But one was calculated to get the writer thinking in new directions: "Say how nervous you were before the game." Now Orange Banana has something specific to consider.

Responders are only required to answer the author's questions on the same Post-it Note, but they often attach new ones to add further, unsolicited advice. G.I. Joe's story about a baseball game came back with a yellow note with this advice: "The story doesn't feel over. What did you gain from the experience? What did you lose? Learn? Did you get a moral? What happens next?" Responders are encouraged to critique the critiques. On a hot-pink Post-it, four different students responded. The first student wrote, "Explode the moment when you were running at him." Others added, "I agree," "I agree also," and "Whoever wrote this was right. What did you feel?" The final draft that G.I. Joe later turned in, under his real name, was quite different from the draft he'd submitted to his unknown responders.

Sometimes, I orchestrate whole-class swaps, requiring everyone to give me a draft with two or three questions attached that I will then hand out to a different class later in the day or the next day. Or I'll make this activity voluntary. I keep stacking trays (also from the office supply store) labeled with the different class hours. Students who want feedback put their drafts in their class's tray. Usually, within two days, an early finisher in another class will wander over to the trays, take out a draft, and respond to it. Waiting authors will enter class each day asking, "Did I get a response yet?" Any gimmick that has kids begging for revision strategies is, in my book, a keeper.

Active reader strategies. Post-its also provide a tool to help create proficient readers who interact with the text, predicting, evaluating, questioning, clarifying, and connecting. I model these strategies, one at a time, reading aloud to the whole class, but I depend on Post-its to help monitor whether or not students are catching on. After I've introduced a strategy, I give students three Post-it Notes and some text and have them apply the strategy, noting their thoughts on the Post-its in three different sections of the text. Later, when they know more strategies and are becoming fluent in their use, students will keep a pack of Post-its on their desks as they read and use them to record their thoughts about the text. When they're done, they peel off the Post-its, recording page numbers as they go, and attach them to a piece of paper in their reader's notebooks. These notes serve as valuable review material if students are required to write a response to the literature or take a test on it, and they allow me to assess students' mastery of the metacognitive strategies.

Ashley read "Stop the Sun" by Gary Paulsen, a short story about a boy struggling to connect with his emotionally distant father, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after the Vietnam War. She employs several of the categories of interacting with the text that I have demonstrated. She connects: "My dad was in the Vietnam War. But he doesn't have Vietnam syndrome." She predicts: "He's going to talk to his dad! I just know it!" She visualizes and evaluates: When the father says, "So I crawled to the side and found Jackson, only he wasn't there, just part of his body, the top part, and I hid under it and waited, and waited, and waited," Ashley wrote, "AHHH! The top part!?! Hid under it!?! Gross!" Near the end of the story, she clarifies her understanding of what the story means to her: "Poor thing! His poor dad! Man, Vietnam really messed him up." Not all students are as spontaneous and genuine as Ashley in their Post-it responses, but I can determine from their notes whether or not a student has attended to and comprehended a piece of text.

Some Uses for Highlighters Other than Drawing on Notebook Covers

My students love highlighters. They love the bright fluorescent colors; they love the snap of the cap. During the first week of school, when best intentions are rampant, or right after report cards have been issued, when middle school students get really serious, I see dozens of students industriously underlining whole paragraphs at a time in their class notes. The rest of the time, I see dozens of enraptured students drawing and doodling and recording the latest loves of their lives on the covers of their notebooks or sometimes on their hands in orange, pink, and lime-green highlighter. Rather than ban highlighters from my room, I decided to take advantage of my students' fascination with them and use it to my advantage, so I set out to find some uses, other than decorative, for highlighters.

Hot spots. I give students a hot-colored highlighter while they're drafting. Anytime they have to pause to guess how to spell *believe* or *fascinating*, or to wonder if they need a comma or if they should use "I" or "me," they highlight that spot in the draft and keep writing. Later, when they're ready to consider mechanics, they go back to the "hot spots" and double-check their guesses with a dictionary, grammar handbook, or proofreading partner.

Sentence structure. I don't know why so many students still write sentence fragments and run-ons in spite of all the red ink their English teachers have spilled in the cause of eradicating them. The following two highlighter tricks are not guaranteed to succeed where all that red ink has failed, but they do make visual a concept that seems too abstract for many students to grasp.

Highlighters aren't just for doodling anymore. In O'Shaughnessy's classroom, they help students refine their writing.

1. I ask students to highlight the ending punctuation marks in a draft, then put an index finger on the first highlighted spot and put the other index finger on the next highlighted spot. If their fingers are two or three words apart, they may have a fragment. If their fingers are waving to each other from across a vast expanse of ink, they may have a run-on. When Joey saw the gap between the first and last words of "It was a sunny day in October and everyone at school was at lunch outside playing soccer or talking about what they were doing for Halloween, me, on the other hand, I was at the soccer field watching everyone play," he recognized for himself that he had a run on, and I didn't even have to try explaining to him what's wrong with the "me, on the other hand, I…" part of his sentence.
2. In another test for run-ons, I ask students to highlight all the verbs in a draft, then check each sentence for highlighted spots. A sentence with more than two verbs may be a run-on or it may need careful punctuation, as in a compound sentence. When Patrick counted six verbs in this sentence, he knew he needed to edit it: "Someone all of a sudden *threw* me the ball and when I *looked* up I *saw* the four eighth graders *chasing* me and all I could do was *run* so I *ran*.

Dialogue. Here is a query high on my list of life's unanswerable questions: Why is it so difficult to remember that a change of speaker requires a new paragraph? Rather than repeatedly asking my students this question, I give these directions: Highlight each character's name the first time it's mentioned in a draft, using a different color for each character. Then, throughout the draft, highlight each character's speeches in his/her assigned color. When it's time for a final draft, don't mix colors in a single paragraph. When the color changes, start a new paragraph.

The five-highlighter exercise. I ask students to assign a different color of highlighter to each of the five senses, then create a key at the top of a draft so they can remember which is which. As students read their own or a partner's draft, they mark sensory details with the corresponding color. After the draft is marked, students hold it up and look at it as if it were an abstract painting. If there's very little color, the draft needs more sensory detail. If one color predominates, the student should try to incorporate more of the other senses. If it looks like an undiscovered Jackson Pollock, perhaps the student has gone overboard with description.

Jesse's story of a fight on the playground was a masterpiece of blue, his sense-of-sight color, but the other senses were scarcely represented. So to his original sentence, "All I can remember was me getting on top of him and punching him in his face," he added a pink, hearing detail, "and hearing the kids yell, 'hit him in his face' and his heavy breathing and groaning." Challenged by his peer editors to use senses other than vision and handed a green and orange highlighter, Ian enhanced his description of football practice: "We were having our first practice in full gear on the hottest day of the summer. The heat made us dizzy." He added, "The adrenalin built up inside me like a bottle. I got set and my senses were at their highest level. My hearing alerted me to Coach inhaling to blow on the whistle."

Not to be. Highlighters can help students ferret out dull words. Vivid verbs are a hallmark of engaging writing, but students are more likely to use the first words that come to their minds, often the overused and uninteresting forms of "to be." I provide students with a list of these "to be" verb forms and send them searching through a draft, highlighting every "to be" verb. Most drafts end up polka-dotted. I challenge students to eliminate five or more, or every third one of the dots by rewriting sentences with more active, vivid verbs.

Recent Discoveries for Which There Must Be Uses

Most people go to an office supply store when they have a need and buy the thing that will fulfill the need. But if you're an office supply junkie, you find the thing and then you figure out what you need it for.

Artist mount spray adhesive. This comes in an aerosol can and is just sticky enough to hold paper or cardboard to a wall but not sticky enough to be permanent or to remove paint. When you spray it on a sheet of paper, poster board, construction paper, or card stock, you get, in effect, a giant Post-it Note. Here are some ways I use this adhesive:

1. Environmental poetry. Students write short poems, illustrate them, and stick them, with the spray adhesive, to spots around the campus where kids stand and wait in line, places such as at the water fountain or on the serving line in the cafeteria. The poems last for a few days, although I'm never certain if the adhesive gives up first or if some fellow middle-schooler has had a hand in the poem's disappearance. But, since all we have invested is a piece of paper and a couple of spurts from the magic can, we don't get upset about the missing poem. In fact, it's sort of a point of honor if some unknown poetry thief liked your poem enough to take it off the wall and keep it.

   For the line at the coke machine, Matt wrote "Wait your Turn."

   When you're standing in line
   You feel like you're dying of thirst
   You push and shove
   To get your Coke first
   All the little kids try to cut in front of you
   When they do, you don't know what to do
   After you've done whatever you can
   They cry and tell a teacher
   And you think, "Aw, man!"

   Ian's "What's on the Spout" graced the wall above a water fountain for a short while:

   I'm going to warn you before you drink
   What's on the spout
   What do you think?
   After I've told you
   I hope you'll be upset
   As you drink that nice water, all cool and wet
   What do roaches do when they crawl in the bowl?
   They crawl and swim around, black as coal
   Silent and swift they take a quick drink
   Now that you're almost done sipping, what do you think?
   Are you upset now because of your haste?
   Is it worth the risk for one little taste?
   Oh, and I should tell you about that mouse who calls the bowl a pool
   I don't think he minds swimming in the water you drink to get cool
   Should you really drink from the fountain at school?

2. Poor man's magnetic poetry. I write words on small, blank flash cards or index cards, then spray the cards or a blank sheet of paper so students can move the words around, resticking them several times as they try out new arrangements to create a poem. They could be a random assortment of evocative words or the words from a published poem.

Using the words from Langston Hughes' "Dream Variations," Erin wrote two poems:

Variations of Me

dream beneath the dark night
dance in the pale sun
whirl tenderly in the evening
rest till day is done

While the Day Is Gone

dream of a place like the cool
evening
and fling the sun gently at night
wide like a tall tree
coming to rest in my arms
Black to some
white to me

Or students can play around with a sticky collection of roots and affixes and see how many actual words they can put together, or make up some that don't exist and define them according to the meaning of the word parts. One class put to use a collection of roots and affixes related to parts to create prefix monsters for an illustrated class book. Each page included a creature's name composed of word parts, the definitions of each part, and a picture of the creature. One page, for example, featured the macro-encephalo-bi-cardio-octo-ped, which is, of course, a creature with a large head, two hearts, and eight feet.

Presentation binders. These look like regular small vinyl binders except that plastic sheet protectors are permanently bound into the place where the rings would normally be. They come with varying numbers of page protectors. Here's how I use them:

1. Day to day. I keep a presentation binder with ten sheets on each of the student tables in my room. Inside are directions for projects in progress in each class, along with successful samples from previous students, reminders of classroom rules, calendars of upcoming events and deadlines, and anything else I get tired of saying a dozen times a day.

Creative classroom supplies: small essentials from the office supply store are kept organized in a shoe storage rack.

Students still ask, "How long does this have to be again?" as often as ever, but now I have an automatic answer: "Look in your table book." Now that students are starting to say "Look in the table book" to each other, I know I'm on to a good thing.

2. Special occasions. For Open House Night or Parent Conference Day, I clean out the mundane material and, with the help of each student, put in the book a sure-to-please-Mom piece of work from each student who sits at the table. It could be an illustrated poem or, since each page is two sided, it could be a before-and-after display in each sleeve with, for instance, a page of a piece of writing from early in the year in front and a page from a later revision or a later piece of work in the back. Parents appreciate the chance to see their child's progress, and the exercise of requiring students to select what to put in their table book provides an excellent form of self-evaluation.

If you have any money left, stop at your favorite superstore on the way home from Office Depot. For under eight dollars, you can buy a hanging shoe organizer with a dozen plastic pockets just the right size to hold highlighters, Post-its, and all the other tiny and essential things needed to make real and practical the big ideas inspired by Linda, Regie, and Nanci.

References

Atwell, Nancie. 1998. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. 1995. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963.* New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books Publishing Group.

Elbow, Peter. 1998. *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Heard, Georgia. 1998. *Awakening the Heat: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rief, Linda. 1991. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Routman, Regie. 1995. *Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy is one of the directors of the National Writing Project of Acadiana, Louisiana, at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Using Favorite Songs as Prompts

MICHAEL FULTON

The writing that resulted from this activity was easily some of the most successful for my struggling students. They were energized by the song's themes, and I felt clever and insightful as I recognized that this workshop was not going to be a chore for any one.

Some of the most successful classroom lessons find their origins in life's simplest moments. Many of my favorite lessons feel as if I stumbled across them. The prompts rarely pop up from the pages of books but often jump out of life's episodes. The following writing lesson, which came out of just such a moment, captured the imaginations of my high school freshmen. The idea grew out of an evening of listening to some live music, during which one song in particular caught my ear. The song, called *Invisible*, is an original piece by Robert Medici. While the music was playing, I found myself searching for a napkin to copy the lyrics on, all the time thinking about how well my students might relate to them.

I think the lyrics, which are transcribed at right, are richly poignant. In particular, the song addresses themes and issues that seem to be part and parcel of the teen years. Certainly, at one point during our high school experience, each of us has felt as invisible as the songwriter's words describe. Because of that, I decided to use this song as a writing prompt in my freshman writing workshops.

I introduced my students to the lesson by talking about my belief that a good song tells a story. As I passed out copies of the lyrics, I explained that we were about to listen to a new favorite song of mine and asked the students to pay attention to what stories the song conjured in their minds. After playing the song through several

Invisible

MUSIC AND LYRICS ROBERT MEDICI
http://www.mp3.com/medici

Begin at the beginning
Before you grow colder
Before those gentle features set in stone
Try to get over flesh and bone
And who is that in the distance
Holding me under
Do I wish away this hollow way I feel
Over and over this endless wheel
No more appealing

If only I thought that you could see
What is so plain to me
Invisible it is
To all but those who know
Just how it feels to be
Invisible like me

Pretty as a picture
But don't get too close now
That's when all the secret
Defects come to shine

Clear illustration of what's not mine
Ignore this feeling

If only I thought that you could see
What is so plain to me
Invisible it is
To all but those who know
Just how it feels to be
Invisible like me

times, we then brainstormed in our notebooks about what this song's story might be. My students' ideas included stories of people

- not being noticed or not getting attention
- feeling as if they have "no life"
- feeling like a "thing" and not a person
- feeling misunderstood
- feeling depressed or anxious
- who had been recently dumped
- experiencing a loss
- expressing their love and finding it unrequited.

I played the song another time and prompted them with more questions: "Who might the character(s) in this story be? Tell me a little about them." After allowing some silent time for them to get their thoughts down, we discussed our brainstorming. My students' responses ranged from the sublime to the sarcastic, with their imagined stories revolving around characters such as

- a high school aged boy/girl
- a young person misunderstood by his/her parents
- a thirty-four-year-old homeless man
- a man rejected on his twenty-first birthday
- a young person struggling with his/her sexual identity
- a divorced man who has lost his children and/or friends
- a person suffering from depression or social anxiety
- a person who feels invisible to God
- a person who is misunderstood because of his/her religious beliefs
- a high school writing teacher who wants to be a novelist.

I kept a running list of our ideas on the board so that they could see all of the wonderful variations we had created. After we listened to and complimented one another, I gave the class the last step in the directions: "We are going to use this song as a guide for a story. You might use the lyrics as the philosophies/feelings of your character or as the building blocks in your character's life story. You may want to be the main character, to pick a friend or family member to serve as a character, or to create a whole new person."

The writing that resulted from this activity was easily some of the most successful for my struggling students. They were energized by the song's themes, and I felt clever and insightful as I recognized that this workshop was not going to be a chore for anyone. In her piece, Jenny wrote in first person:

> *It was like I had disappeared. I saw Joey and his new girl friend Chris Black. She was a cheerleader! He dumped me for a cheerleader!! I was stunned.*

Megan was more direct, "It was another typical day in high school, or as many considered it, a living hell."

Meanwhile, Christine developed a narrator for her story:

> *She feels very lost. She is in a brand new environment with so many older people around her. Every time she goes to her next period class, she is always being pushed around by upperclassmen.*

And Sophia wrote in journal/diary style:

> *Everyone knows each other here. I feel so left out. Everyone was talking about all of his or her memories of middle school. I miss my old school. I want to go back.*

Several students created innovative and expansive fiction. These students explored imagined people with their stories. Beyond reshaping and reproducing their own stories, this prompt enabled these writers to take risks. Jonathan wrote about a character who was a clergy person, "For the past two weeks, the five-eight priest with gray hair has been avoiding his family whom he cherished his whole life . . . He has been like this ever since his mom died; he feels invisible to God." Alan, who was otherwise a very concrete thinker, took on a homeless person's thoughts: "He lives under a bench in a park where only seagulls live. He has one shoe, a pair of pants, and one shirt. He has no friends, no family, and no life." Jesse, who typically clung to comic offerings, crafted an empathetic story of a girl impregnated after a one-night stand:

> *Mary felt so used and dirty. She sat in the dark room and cried… Nobody would understand. It felt like she was invisible and had no one to turn to. Nobody would accept her or understand. She was all alone. She escaped over the fence with ten dollars on her and hitched a ride where nobody would ever find her.*

Underlining their favorite lines of the song turned out to be good advice for writers struggling to begin. After focusing his attention on a few lines, Alec was able to get started:

> *Beth was starting to get mad because she thought that Billy had not talked to her enough and had no right to be jealous in the first place. Beth felt invisible because Billy is ignoring her and not talking to her.*
>
> *Billy thinks Beth is as pretty as a picture and wants to keep the*

> *relationship strong. The fact that Beth feels invisible really hurts Billy, but he still wants to keep up the relationship.*

Sharing our brainstorming always works well, too. Andrew was unable to find a topic that grabbed his attention, but as we went through the list, he was able to relate to an idea. And when I suggested that it might be easier for him to write with someone else as the main character, his story flowed onto the page:

> *As he walked downstairs, his mom yelled at him and told him he was a lazy bum. "Why can't you be more like your brother?" she said. His brother was a total jock. He was a senior at Staples.*
>
> *Dane doesn't really have any friends because people think he is a geek. At gym, Dane is pathetic; people laugh at his bad coordination and awful skills.*

As a precursor to this lesson or as a continuation of it, you may want to let your students choose their own songs. With the recent renaissance of interest in jazz, you may want to expose your students to Billy Holiday through a recording of her classic *Solitude*, with which Medici's song shares a similar tone and theme. And don't forget that Charlie Parker loved listening to country and western raconteurs.

I must admit that in the course of this lesson, it was interesting to watch my students, who are mostly Limp Bizkit or Eminem fans, moan and groan through the first few times we listened to Medici's songs. Now, they actually ask to listen to his folk-rock songs during our workshop days. But, it was the success I saw my class encounter with this lesson that really made it worthwhile to both them and me. In students' final portfolio letters, many wrote of this paper as being their favorite workshop experience. Andrew, who had such trouble starting his paper, wrote, "I think that if someone read my 'Invisible' story, they would think twice about making fun of someone different than them." Monica was enthusiastic about the novelty of writing to music, writing, "I really love music, which was why I enjoyed writing this story." Christine reflected, "I think the reason why my thoughts have come easier to me is because you assigned us topics that I enjoyed writing about, such as the 'Invisible Song.'"

When the writing workshops were first considered at my school, they were thought of as a supplement to regular English courses that had a distinctly drill-oriented flavor. But I believed my students needed more. My design has involved giving students time to become fluent on the page before I restricted their writing with format-driven exercises. I wanted my students to write from their interests and needs so that all other academic concerns would make more sense. And when a student uses a sentence like "I enjoy writing," a teacher knows he or she has done something right. Feedback like that is enough to keep a teacher looking—and listening—for other, equally inspiring ideas . . . waiting for that next inspirational moment . . . no matter when or where it is to be found.

MICHAEL FULTON teaches the writing workshops at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut. A fellow of the New York City Writing Project, he is currently associated with the Connecticut Writing Project. He is the author of *Exploring Careers in Cyberspace* (Rosen, 1998).

Call for manuscripts

Writing About the Unfamiliar

For the winter issue of *The Quarterly*, we are looking for accounts of students writing about a world they are experiencing for the first time. Under the theme, "Writing About the Unfamiliar," we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to Yorkshire and the Lake District in England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature, the students' explorations peaked their senses and inspired their writing.

The adventures covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors. "Writing About the Unfamiliar" may grow out of a group visiting a college campus or a writer exploring a neighborhood that he or she hasn't visited before. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn what techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception of and reflection about new experiences.

The deadline for submissions to the winter issue of *The Quarterly* is November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org, or mail them to:

Editors, *The Quarterly*
National Writing Project
University of California
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

The National Writing Project supports teachers like you.

The National Writing Project values teacher knowledge.

The National Writing Project knows teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.

The National Writing Project believes teachers are the key to reform in education.

Become a National Writing Project Associate, and you will receive *The Quarterly*, our professional journal written by and for teachers; *The Voice*, our national newsletter that puts you in touch with outstanding teachers across the country; and a 20 percent discount on NWP books.

To learn more about the National Writing Project, or to find a site near you, please call (510) 642-0963.

QSP01

Yes, I want to support the National Writing Project!

I've enclosed my contribution. Please put me on your mailing list so that I can receive upcoming issues of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* and a 20 percent discount on NWP books.

Here's how to reach me:

Name ______________________
Address ______________________
City/State/Zip ______________________
Phone ______________________
Email ______________________

Here's my contribution:

☐ $20 (1-year sponsor: 4 *Quarterlys*, 5 *Voices*, and a 20 percent discount on books)

☐ $50 (3-year sponsor: 12 *Quarterlys*, 15 *Voices*, and a 20 percent discount on books)

Local Writing Project ______________________

☐ Check ☐ VISA ☐ MC Account # ☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐

Exp. Date ______________ Signature ______________________

Please mail this form with your payment to:

National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Or fax this form with your credit card information to (510) 642-4545.

Lessons from Tony

Betrayal and Trust in Teacher Research

SHARON K. MILLER

Tony was a good teacher, and my experience with him and his ultimate refusal to give up ownership of his work shaped my thinking regarding the relationship between the teacher-researcher, her students, and the data that is the work of those students.

Tony came into my classroom early, as usual, limping over to my work table and hoisting up his solid frame. An eighteen-year-old senior, Tony had been in special education since first grade. My writing workshop may have been the first "regular" class, other than physical education and his vocational trade, that he had experienced. His disabilities seemed obvious. He walked with a limp, had minimal use of his right arm, and had a severe speech impediment, characteristics of the cerebral palsy–like condition that affected the right side of his body.

He looked down at the piles of papers and transparencies scattered on the table. As my co-researcher and subject, he knew I was working on a presentation about our work together. I had been tracing some of his writing onto transparencies, and when he read them, he said, "That not right."

The brief poems he had written were part of the best data I had collected on him all year. They were first drafts and almost errorless. I wanted to keep them unrevised as examples of what he could now do without teacher intervention.

Now, as he looked the poems over, he saw an error. I asked him where it was. He pointed to the word "all" and told me it should be "falling." Then he handed me the transparency and said "Fix it." I hesitated, not wanting to change the first-draft status of the work. He repeated, a bit more forcefully, "Fix it."

"But Tony," I said, "I wanted a good sample of your first-draft writing. If I fix it, it won't be a first draft anymore."

He looked me square in the eye and said, "If you don't fix it, you can't use it."

I asked permission to fix it with a different color pen so my audience would still be able to see his first-draft work and he agreed. He read the other transparencies and found another error. I corrected it as he instructed without an argument.

This was the first time Tony had ever denied me the right to use his work, but it would not be the last. As we approached the end of the year, he was demanding that I live up to my claim that he was my co-researcher, my collaborator. He knew that his writing and his spelling had changed, and he knew that his work was his work. He was proud of himself.

Tony's insistence on maintaining control of his writing illustrates an ethical dilemma in teacher research. Who owns student work after it becomes data? Does a signature on an "informed consent" form confer ownership to the researcher? To what extent should the students who are often the subjects of teacher research have a say in how their work is used?

Two years ago, at the National Writing Project meeting in Denver, teacher-researchers gathered for a discussion on ethics. There was general agreement related to a number of issues, but the discussion about ownership was not resolved fully. Some—myself included—argued that students retain ownership and should be consulted regarding the use of their work. Others believed that an informed consent form granted ownership to the teacher who could then use it freely. One suggested that all student work becomes the property of the teacher and, consequently, the teacher could use it as she sees fit.

That I was appalled by that last notion speaks strongly of my own ethical stance toward teacher research and ownership. I didn't come to that stance easily. Tony taught me right from wrong.

Tony was a good teacher, and my experience with him and his ultimate refusal to give up ownership of his work shaped my thinking regarding the relationship between the teacher-researcher, her students, and the data that is the work of those students.

He taught me that the relationship must be based on truth, honesty, integrity, and a mutual respect. He twice refused to allow me to publish some of his writings. Each time, he had valid reasons, and although he willingly negotiated conditions for using these poems, he was not willing to even discuss the publication of the other piece. In that instance, I respected his decision even though the writing in question was the "breakthrough" piece, representing the point in the year when everything about his writing suddenly changed.

The Research Begins

I began my first teacher-research project, almost by accident, in September of 1988 with a small group of special education seniors who had failed Maryland's required writing assessment in three previous no-fault administrations and who were the first class for whom the test was a graduation requirement. If they did not pass the test this year, they would not graduate. The class had come about as a result of a conversation between my assistant principal and me about how these students might be helped to meet the challenge of the writing test. Because I believed it was more about writing than about a test, I believed that I should be systematic and document their progress. Thus, I had a teacher-research project on my hands.

The class was designed to meet very specific needs of a very specific population, but the students involved were not consulted nor given a choice prior to being placed in the class. Some of them would have preferred taking physical education, but even they reluctantly agreed that it might do them some good to stick around and get more practice with writing.

On the first day of school, I explained that we were going to track their progress and collect data on their growth as writers and that I would need them to help me understand why and how they were learning. I invited them to be my co-researchers. I'm not sure if, at that time, I fully understood the implications of such an invitation. Of course, I wanted to give them additional reasons to "buy in" to the class, and I seriously wanted them to approach the project positively. I had each of them, or their parents if they were not eighteen, sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the research and acknowledging the fact that their work might be included in a future publication related to the research.

On the whole, they were quite cooperative. They seemed genuinely pleased with the different kind of attention they got from my approach to the class. Because I was not a special education teacher, I didn't have to implement their Individual Education Programs (IEPs), and I could take them in directions they had not gone before with writing. They offered one another support and encouragement, and a close-knit community developed during that first semester when we worked together. They were willing to offer insights into their thinking and to examine their learning closely. They told me what worked and what didn't. At times they struggled, but at other times they virtually took flight. For me, it was a most amazing experience.

In January, the writing test would be given and if they failed it again, there would be no opportunity to take it again until the summer. They knew their graduation hung by that thread, and they took their expectations seriously. When the semester ended, they would go off to their elective classes—phys ed, music—and I would teach creative writing, a writing workshop available to the general school population.

Tony was one of ten students assigned to the original class. My goals for the teacher-research project were to provide multiple opportunities to write using the writing process, to identify errors and patterns of error, to track their progress, and to determine the individual writing strategies each of them needed to succeed on the test. The identification and internalization of personal strategies would be important, because they would need to access those strategies independent of teacher guidance and support to be successful on the test.

Although my research plan was about finding key strategies for each of the students, along the way, one boy, David, emerged as a potential case study. I began to track him more closely. He and Tony were the two for whom the test would be the biggest challenge. At first, Tony did not stand out either behaviorally or with his writing progress—at least I failed to notice his progress. He plugged along, complaining about revision, and interrupting from time to time to demand the correct spelling of a word. To be honest, in spite of my desire to believe in all of those students, I think I lacked the confidence that Tony could pass the test. His speech patterns were almost unintelligible, and his writing was a mirror image of the syntax he used in speech. I wonder now if I chose David for the case study because, even though he also had a long way to go, I was more confident that he had a shot at passing the test. After all, who wants to do a case study on the kid who might fail?

I did not read the students' files nor solicit any kind of report on their backgrounds from their special ed teachers. I believed it was important to keep an open mind and not begin with preconceived notions about the students. In spite of that, the special education teachers were quick to share their assessment of all of the students and their potential to succeed on the test. I noted these comments in my research journal but promised myself I would not be influenced. Of Tony, they had said that he was "middle-schoolish," that he was immature, that he had no sense of humor, that his thinking was low level and simplistic, and that he could not pass the test. Upon reviewing my research journal at a later date, I was shocked to catch myself echoing these sentiments in spite of evidence to the contrary in recorded anecdotes about performance and classroom behaviors.

However, slowly, almost imperceptibly, within the anecdotes and observations in my journal, Tony began to emerge from the ranks, proving his special education teachers' assessment wrong. He did have a sense of humor—I noticed this first. While he complained loudly about having to move from a first draft to a second, I discovered that he could be coaxed and kidded into action. I think he genuinely enjoyed the repartee with me as ritual before moving to the next step. When I recognized the evidence in my journal, I began to observe him more closely. I saw evidence of higher-level thinking, specifically in regard to his efforts to help listeners deal with his speech impairment. Whenever anyone had trouble understanding him, he would patiently repeat, first trying to pronounce more carefully. If that failed, he might try to spell the word or give the first letters; if success still eluded his listener, he would try defining the word, using a synonym, or reading the context if he was working with a draft. I saw these as sophisticated communication strategies.

I began to believe that his use of these compensatory strategies represented higher-level thinking. Seen in that light, Tony was analyzing his listener's predicament and choosing alternative methods of communicating the word or words in question. If his awareness of his inadequate spoken language meant that he had a conscious awareness of what correct language should sound like, did that hold the key to improving his skills? It was a question that begged for an answer. This new understanding of Tony's language awareness did, in fact, lead us to the writing strategy that would liberate his inner voice.

The Researcher's Dilemma

Data is, of course, at the heart of teacher research. But how far should we go to capture the data that we think we need? In our quest for the most authoritative and powerful data to answer our questions, do we ever cross the line and betray our students' trust? I did.

All of the students except Tony had agreed to have some of their writing conferences taped. Tony's refusal was, of course, related to his speech. He understandably didn't want it on tape. However, I needed a way to capture his awareness of correct speech as data; I needed to document it.

These conferences, I believed, were important data, and I wanted to record all of them. Of course, I had agreed not to tape Tony, but I knew that I would never be able to reconstruct our conference from memory. I needed that documentation. That fact outweighed ethical considerations, so I betrayed him. I hid my small microcassette recorder in my pocket and recorded the conference. At the end of the conference, I knew I had some very valuable data, and I felt guilty. Fortunately, I wasn't so despicable that I would use it without his permission. Was I thinking like an ethical researcher (after the fact!) or was I worried that Tony would discover my betrayal later? It's painful to admit it, but perhaps it was the latter. I took the tape recorder from my pocket and laid it on the desk, admitting what I had done. Tony looked stricken, and although I felt awful, I didn't want to lose the data, so I had to persuade him to let me use it. I promised Tony that no one but me would ever hear the tape and that I'd like to make a written transcript of it since it had some very important information on it. I promised that if he did not like what he read in the transcript, he could have the tape and I would not use the information. He agreed and I was delighted, all my guilt swept away. I don't know what I would have done if he had refused. Would I have used it anyway?

I'm sure that if Tony wanted to say no to me that day, he couldn't do it. It's easy for me to say that I was right, based on the value of the data and Tony's ultimate forgiveness of my betrayal, but even now I wonder to what degree I manipulated him into doing just what I wanted him to do. In many ways, during that year, I was guilty of underestimating Tony. Thankfully, he didn't always let me get away with it.

Tony's Breakthrough

The writing test came and went. I read Tony's test before it was sent out for scoring, and I knew it would fail. I had seriously believed he would do better than he did, but one of the test prompts led him to writing about something that was personally painful for him, and he couldn't handle the emotion and the writing simultaneously. All of the students knew I had read their tests, and they wanted to know how I would score them. It was hard telling Tony I believed he would fail once more.

Even before this, however, he had decided he would stay with me for the second semester of creative writing workshop. He was one of just two students who elected to stay. He said he wanted to continue working on his writing, but I really think he felt a sense of importance and security in my class that he had not experienced before, and he didn't want to give that up.

Routinely, students in the creative writing workshop began the period with freewriting in their journals. At the end of each week, I collected their journals for my response. One week, early in that second semester, I was shocked by what I read in Tony's journal. (See Figure 1.)

It was actually a return to something he had mentioned in his journal during the first semester and then had put away, a retrospective on his childhood in Baltimore near Federal Hill where he had lived. I had never read anything of Tony's—even his edited work—that was anywhere near as fluent. Nor had he ever produced anything so technically accurate—no spelling errors and only one minor semantic error. From my own observation notes, I knew that he had not asked me or anyone else for spelling assistance, that he had worked quietly and intently on this journal entry. Where had this voice come from?

There was a thoughtful quality, bordering on the poetic, that had emerged with this piece. It may have been the first thing he had ever written that was personally important to him. It had come from deep within; it stirred him, and the voice spoke more clearly and articulately than ever before. When I encouraged him to explore this topic further, to elaborate and to tell his Federal Hill stories, he became upset. He vehemently refused and was upset with himself for even writing this much. He was reluctant to share it with others, perhaps afraid somehow that they would be able to understand—even though he couldn't—things he wanted to remember, or perhaps to forget. I didn't press the issue and let it drop.

> I grew up in Baltimore City. I lived a block away from the Inner Harbor over top of a barber shop. I used to go to school close by Federal Hill park. You can walk to Federal Hill park from my old school. The Federal Hill park has a REC area up there. Me and my brothers went to the park to play game everyday after school and on the weekend. I am going back where I grew up and see my old friends and see if the barber shop is still there. I am going up to the park and think about my past. I like to stand at Federal Hill park and look over the water and see Fort McHenry from the park.

Figure 1. Tony's Federal Hill piece marked a breakthrough in his writing.

In the meantime, believing my research project was coming to a close, I had begun to analyze my student's data in light of their educational backgrounds. It was time to examine student confidential files to gather more data to compare with what I had collected. In reading about Tony's background, I understood more clearly the importance—and the pain—of the Federal Hill piece. Both of Tony's parents had died when he lived at Federal Hill, and he had been bounced from foster home to foster home since then, rarely seeing or even knowing the whereabouts of his brothers.

During the second semester, I began to document real achievement and growth in Tony's fluency and accuracy that was clearly inconsistent with expectations defined by previous intelligence test data. Though still frequently dependent on others for spelling, he became the most prolific of all students in the creative writing class, which included students from all grade levels and abilities—with only one other from special education. By April, Tony's writing showed drastic improvement, though the thoughtful Federal Hill voice remained suppressed.

During the creative writing class, one of his best writings was a series of poems on the seasons. He had written the first one, "Spring," earlier in the semester, and in May he decided to do one for each of the remaining seasons (See Figure 2). This time, I told him they were fine just as written in the first draft. Because I usually sent him back to look for his typical errors, he was at first delighted, and then suspicious. He asked, "I don't have to revise them?" I told him I was happy with them as they were. I did not tell him they were perfect—they weren't, but they represented the best first-draft writing he had ever done, and I wanted to keep them that way as examples of what he could do with very little teacher intervention. I chose not to explain my thinking to him, being consciously deceptive, fearful that he would demand correction and compromise the data that illustrated how far he had come with his first-draft writing. I had relegated him back to "subject," failing to trust him as my collaborator and informant.

It was these poems traced onto transparencies that he demanded we correct. I was shocked by his threat that I could not use the work without correcting it, but I knew he was right. Why couldn't I have included him in the interpretation and discussed with him the best way to represent his first draft work? After all, in the first semester, he and the other students had often participated in the analysis of the data. In the end, the issue was successfully resolved, with his first draft—and his pride—preserved. But again, I had betrayed his trust, and this time, he did not let me off the hook. In spite of myself, I was proud of him.

Tony's Second Refusal

The second time he refused to allow me to use his work, I could do nothing but agree. There was no alternative; there was no persuading (or manipulating) him. I did not even try.

I had written my first draft of Tony's case study before the end of the school year. In it, I had followed his writing progress from the first day of school through his May poems, demonstrating my initial failure to recognize what was happening and emphasizing how the Federal Hill piece had seemed to be a breakthrough for both Tony and me. I invited him to sit with me one afternoon and listen to the draft. (His firm reminder that he was my co-researcher had stuck.) I wanted to make sure he heard the paper and had the opportunity to respond and to offer insights I might have missed. It was, after all, his story. When I got to the part of the paper where I discussed the Federal Hill piece, he blanched and shouted, "No!"

SUMMER
Lots of people like summer
because it is so hot in the
summertime.
Lots of people take vacation that time.
Most people go down the ocean to go swim.

FALL
Lots of people do not like
fall becase of the leaf
fall[ing] down on the gronde
and people do not
like to rake the leaf up.
Fall is so close to winter.

WINTER
Lots of people do not like
Winter becase of the bad
snow storm. The people have
to shove[l] the car out and
the kids donnot have
to go to school.

Figure 2. Tony's series of poems on the seasons represent the best first-draft writing he had ever done. The corrections he later negotiated are in brackets.

Even though I remembered that he had refused to write more about Federal Hill previously, I was startled and puzzled by his reaction. He told me that I could not put that piece into the paper. Even as I lamely pointed out its importance to his journey through the year, I knew his pain was real. I agreed and told him I would revise the article and omit any reference to that piece of writing. It was hard for me to do, because I believed that single piece of writing was the clearest possible evidence that he had within him a clear, articulate, and unimpeded voice. Even as his work had become technically better, the thoughtful, fluent voice had never reemerged in other writing. It was the treasure. And it was once again buried.

Later, during the summer, I called Tony to tell him I had finished the article and I wanted to come and read it to him for his final approval. He had moved back to Baltimore City with a foster family from his early childhood. Tony and I sat at the kitchen table, along with his foster family, and I read the story aloud for all of them. When I finished, I looked up at Tony for his comment, and he said, "Put Federal Hill back in."

Once again, he had shocked and puzzled me. Once again, he reminded me he was my co-researcher and informant, as much as my subject. I was relieved, and when I asked him why he had changed his mind, he said, simply, "It needs to be there."

Perhaps it was a combination of things. Maybe he recognized how its lack affected the overall impact of his story. Maybe he felt better about himself now that he was legally independent of the foster care system, but back in Baltimore with a family who cared enough about him to give him a home. Maybe sufficient time had passed to soften the pain his memories of Federal Hill had brought. Maybe he was testing me. Whatever it was, I'm grateful that I can share his whole story with others, but even more so, I'm grateful for what he taught me about the relationship between the teacher-researcher and her students.

Ethics in Teacher Research

Much has been written about ethics in research. It is not difficult to find articles and books dealing with the issues raised when researchers anywhere examine the work and behavior of others in order to answer questions. Most commonly, in regard to action research, one may find resources that explore the ethics involved in university/public school partnerships, that is, insider-outsider research. For example, Thomas Newkirk cautions us that researchers "... have a special obligation to recognize the vulnerability of those they study" (5). While he is specifically speaking of the teacher as the vulnerable individual in this relationship with the university researcher, it is no less true that in teacher research the students are vulnerable. Our students are at the mercy of our questions and the decisions we make regarding the use and representation of the data collected. When we represent their work and their behaviors through our data, it is they, perhaps more than ourselves, whom we make public.

Teacher research is distinguished by the fact that it is insider research. The teacher researches while she teaches; she does not quit teaching in order to complete the research. The goal, then, is to improve practice and enhance student learning (Van den Berg, 85). This circumstance changes the dynamic of researcher-subject relationships and obliges the teacher-researcher to be up front with her students during the progress of the research.

In my continuing work with teacher research and with teacher-researchers, the lessons Tony taught me take a prominent position. I regularly engage my novice teacher-researchers in conversations about ethics. I encourage them to share their research with their students, to involve them in the collection and analysis of data, to grant them status as co-researchers during the project. It is not a simple thing to do, and it requires not only acknowledging that we can learn a great deal from them, but also relinquishing some degree of power to them. I believe strongly that we have a responsibility to them to respect and honor their integrity.

In a truly collaborative relationship, "the researcher and the informants participate as a team; they become co-researchers who explore an issue of common interest and concern. They co-author the research questions, co-collect, co-analyze, and co-interpret the data, and they co-construct the final products (e.g., written reports, public presentations).... They learn to respect one another's perspective and honor one another's trust" (Williams, 51). Again, this relationship is possible in the realm of teacher research. In some regards, I succeeded in doing this with Tony, but only insofar as he was able to keep me focused on our relationship as he understood it. And, I must remember, that it was I who defined our relationship as collaborators to begin with. He believed me, and he used that understanding to keep me on the straight and narrow whenever I strayed.

I believe strongly in the value of collaboration between the researcher and her informants. In fact, even though I have used it here many times, I dislike the commonly used word "subject"—a term that suggests a relationship of power and submission, that implies that research is done on or to someone, not with them. After all, quite often teacher research is as much about the teacher and her practice as it is about the students and their learning. I think my own failures with Tony were the result of my viewing him as a subject rather than an informant.

Owen Van de Berg points out that even the notion of protecting student privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, which are critical to any research project, "presupposes an unequal relationship between the researcher and the people he or she claims to be researching with (if the claim is that the work is collaborative.)" He goes on to compare the subjects of research to those of the prerevolutionary French kings and calls the relationship "feudal" (85). His preferred term for participants in research is "inhabitants," and he advocates involving them fully along the continuum of data collection, analysis, and publication.

"Informant," a term I prefer, suggests a collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship. When possible and appropriate, students should speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for through the voices of teacher-researchers. Looking back, I am struck by the irony of my simultaneous efforts to liberate and to stifle Tony's voice in our research project. I'm glad he won in the end.

While the development of a code of ethics for teacher-researchers may address some of our concerns about how students are viewed and treated within the area of teacher research, it is often the case that teacher-researchers and the school systems that encourage their work have not developed clear guidelines. Even so, it is not likely that such guidelines, when written, will recommend that teacher research be conducted as a collaboration with students. Nor do they always provide clear definitions of the students' roles in the process. Typically, the guidelines include issues related to the teacher-researcher role (which may promote open communication with the students), research plans, data collection, research results, and publication. Marian Mohr's discussion of the development of a statement of ethics in teacher research supports the notion of collaboration but does not imply that in all cases collaboration is a requirement (9-10). Nor should it be. Teacher-researchers will have to make their own decisions based on their beliefs, as well as what is permitted in their school systems and how their practices can comply with such codes.

Generally, obtaining permission for the research is of paramount importance in all circumstances. Nevertheless, we must remember that the consent form does not bestow upon us the rights and privileges of a demigod. In my case, most of my students were eighteen and were able to sign their own consent forms, even though their parents were fully informed as well. I was working with students for whom graduation was at stake. How could they refuse? Are special education students and their parents more vulnerable than others when the stakes are so high? Newkirk pointedly reminds us of the power of the consent form:

> *The consent form tends to heighten the sense of importance of the study about to be undertaken, and, most significantly, by being filled with assurances it stresses our own benevolence. Then, in a moment of great irony, the subject signs a form indicating he or she was fully informed—even though the American Psychological Association grants researchers the right to deceive in the interests of science (5).*

In my view, there is no room in teacher research for deception. My own behavior with Tony was inexcusable, in spite of the fact that he forgave me my sins. If we deceive our students, it is not just our character we must question; I believe deception can taint our findings. I had thought at one time that Tony was not a good candidate for a case study because he was likely to fail the writing test. I was looking for the successful project. I was looking for the one who would make me look good. I wanted to do my case study on David, who seemed to have a better, though slim, chance of passing. It was a gamble, but the odds were better. But now I have two case studies. I have David's, which is interesting enough—he made some good progress, but still failed the test. And then there's Tony's case study. He, too, made good progress, and he, too, failed the test. But his case study is less about preparing to take a writing test than it is about self-discovery—his and mine.

What I learned from Tony was to have far-reaching implications for my teaching practice—whether conducting teacher research or not, whether teaching high school, university, or graduate students. I learned to listen more closely to my students' voices, to respect those voices, and to remember who owns the work they produce on behalf of my instruction. I learned that if I invite my students to participate with me in teacher research, I have to mean it. And I learned that even if student work is data, their right of ownership must be respected within the process of teacher research. While I hope what he learned from me has served him well in the years since we worked together on this project, I know that what I learned from him is the most valuable lesson of all. Thanks, Tony.

Author's note: Because of their failure to properly communicate information about a change in scoring procedures, state officials decided to delay implementation of the test as a graduation requirement. As a result, both David and Tony were able to graduate even though they failed the writing test once again.

References

Mohr, Marian M. 2001. "Drafting Ethical Guidelines for Teacher Research in Schools." In *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research.* Edited by Jane Zeni. New York: Teachers College Press.

Newkirk, Thomas. 1996. "Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research." In *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Ray, Ruth. 1996. Afterword: "Ethics and Representation in Teacher-Research." In *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Van den Berg, Owen. 2001. "The Ethics of Accountability in Action Research." In *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research.* Edited by Jane Zeni. New York: Teachers College Press.

Williams, Cheri L. 1996. "Dealing with the Data: Ethical Issues in Case Study Research." In *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy.* Edited by Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

At the time of her research with Tony, Sharon Miller was the English department chair and a teacher of tenth and twelfth grade English at Harford Technical High School, Harford County, Maryland, where she was affiliated with the Maryland Writing Project. She retired in 1997 after a thirty-year career in Harford County Public School System, finally as an assistant supervisor of English and Language Arts. She moved to Arizona and is now affiliated with the Southern Arizona Writing Project, where she is the co-director for teacher research.

The Writing Process Rejected

ORLEAN R. ANDERSON

By attaching a "the" in front of the two key words "writing process," we imply to students that writing process consists of correct steps. We also imply that the steps are exactly the same for all writers. People who actually write know better.

"The writing process is stupid." His voice was edged with the cynicism of one who has spent the last ten years detecting the games he is positive teachers play. I had been startled to attention by his words and was already studying his face when the young student teacher, who had invited me to observe, turned to me helplessly. Her lesson was imploding before her eyes. She needed bailing out.

I don't remember what I said to his defiant glare. Something not very articulate, I'm sure. Something on the order of, "Really? Why do you think so?" Whatever it was, he wasn't buying it, and our exchange ended quickly. He never got around to saying exactly why he had pronounced such a harsh verdict on the writing process, but he didn't really need to explain because I had been feeling the same way for the past year, maybe longer.

Each time I open a textbook and turn to the chapter entitled "The Writing Process" and am greeted by Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, I grit my teeth. When I go into a classroom where the "Steps in the Writing Process" are stretched out in that cramped space between the ceiling and the blackboard, my frustration grows. I have even become impatient with the "madman, architect, judge" jargon. Somehow, it is all too orderly, too linear, too controlled. Textbook publishers take pride in selling their books on the premise that the lessons within those covers are "teacher-proof"—and now the writing process has been "teacher-proofed"!

In many classrooms, right now, students are opening their books to "Chapter 8: The Writing Process; Step 1: Prewriting." They know, I feel sure, that those steps do not really define their own complex, even mysterious, process of composing and creating. They know because they know how hard it is to write something that artistically pleases someone else, that logically informs another person. They know, from experience, that success in writing is often a matter of luck or inspiration, two factors that we have not, as yet, ordered up into "steps." Publishers and teachers together have codified the writing process, assuredly with the best intentions. Maybe we have acted out of a need to be "clear" or "fair" or out of a belief, so often stated in collegial conversation, that structure is good for the kids who aren't gifted, kids who just don't know where to start. That same tired line is often used to justify the five-paragraph formula of structuring a student's writing. In fact, it is my gifted students who often take refuge in steps and five-paragraph organization. My regular and alternative students, on the other hand, soar when we take off the blinders and open up the messy possibilities. As teachers, we seem to find comfort in clearly delineated steps, formulas that we can outline and evaluate. Maybe it is this need for control that has led so many of us to mold a messy creative phenomenon into a checklist.

Whatever the reasons, in many classrooms, students are proclaiming, "I hate the writing process!" never realizing the irony of that implication: that they are professing to hate the ways their minds seize ideas, images, and emotions; the way their minds translate those inspirations into language that interests or pleases or enlightens other human beings. By attaching a "the" in front of the two key words "writing process," we imply to students that writing process consists of correct steps. We also imply that the steps are exactly the same for all writers. People who actually write know better. Below, several writer-colleagues describe their complex, sometimes chaotic, act of composing. All of them are teacher-consultants with the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

Early Stages

Sidney Brown: [A piece begins] with wanting to explore something or to ferret out a feeling [from] drawers full of journals taped up with concepts I've read, images that seem layered, words that echo some kind of experience I've had, and thoughts that tug at something very intrinsic to me."

Bob Ingalls: I often get ideas from other authors. I love to imitate style. Reading suggests ideas to me. I get ideas from other writers. I want to respond to, build on, or explore an author's ideas. Talk helps, but sometimes I write first.

Bill McCabe: [My] best writing starts out in misty, undefined shapes in the back of my mind.... They are important to me but not easily articulated. [I may have] pinned down the idea [which] may be as vague as the power of guilt over a child or the pain of lying to someone you love. Many times I will give first voice to these ideas in a prewriting that I am doing for myself or with my students.

Bernie Glaze: I write in my journal all of the time—often in the middle of meetings to vent or to dump a feeling or idea that is interfering with my ability to focus. I choose personal topics on the basis of what I need to write about, that old Macrorie idea of the topic choosing you, but that is not as easy as it sounds. I find that learning to listen to oneself in a genuine way is a learned art.

Next Considerations

Sidney: [Ideas then take on] some order in the mental and spiritual dimension. The piece immediately, and often not obviously, begins to evolve in the subconscious or dream state.

Bob: One sentence, well written, is often what I need to get direction. That sentence rings in my head and brings a rhythm to my ideas. It is about sound, often. I feel the writing in my body, somewhere, and I move to that rhythm.

Bill: [I invent a] powerful first line. I try deliberately not to understand the whole story.... I'm not sure where it's going to go. It is like putting your fingers over your eyes and allowing yourself only small peeks at something in front of you. I want to know my subject slowly, to approach it like a stranger. I care only about the language of the first sentence—making sure it will draw the reader in, provoke a thought or emotion that feels right to me. [It] can take weeks or months, with many revisions of just that sentence. Once I've written a first line that I'm happy with, I stop writing [to allow my] subconscious mind to mull over the way the story might work itself out.

Bernie: In my job, I am never given the opportunity to choose topics—they are always foisted upon me. And I often have to write for hostile audiences or unknown audiences. What saves me is knowing my subject well; however, if I know ... just a little about it, then [this is where] I have to know how to find out.

Moving Along

Sidney: Once a mapping of the piece emerges into the "awake" state, I begin to put it to paper, at the computer. [I] cut, delete, move, and experiment with form. The structure or form of the writing is not apparent at first [but it is in this] nothingness state that serendipitous things happen: words and relationships of words come out. Ideas twine into relationships overlapping and feeding into other ideas at unpredictable points. Eventually the clarity of the piece—the story and understory of the piece—makes itself known.

Bob: I revise as I write, sometimes after I write the first draft. If I don't have that rhythm, I have to wordsmith each sentence until I get the feel. I don't play madman—I can't until I get the feel in my body for what I am writing. Then other times I have to discover what I have to say or how I feel. This [part] gets messy, and it usually follows one sentence well written. I follow the feel of the writing."

Bill: [I remain] unaware [of my piece but I am aware that] family, friends and enemies, my outlook on what is right and wrong, all play into how the story takes shape. From time to time, I consciously remind myself that it is still a work in progress . . . that I am free to invent, as well as remember, the story, but most of what happens at this very important [stage] is invisible, unknowable, elusive.

Continuing

Sidney: [At this point my] critical eye . . . the editor's eye that cares about audience and voice and layers of meaning [comes in]. I begin to strengthen my writing through parallelism, tighter phrasing, metaphoric language, a strengthening of the thread that leads to the reader, and [I] double-check that I have dealt with everything I've brought on stage.

Bernie: Usually I use my own eye.

Bill: When the time feels right, usually right before a deadline, I begin to type on the computer. I find it hard to write a first draft by hand, although I like to do revisions in pen. I watch the story come out. I need a large block of time, and it almost always has to happen late at night.

Bob: [Now I write] multiple drafts, sometimes handwritten because I want to feel the paper and the pen. There's movement involved. I often move my hands to the sound of the writing, like a ballet in the air. I also walk and move about to the rhythm, rehearsing the writing in my head and out loud. I may say part [of the writing] to someone.

Sidney: My classroom is arranged in circular seating with the computer and printer outside the circle. Once [I have] verse or paragraphs, [I move] just outside that circumference and begin to walk the circular path around the student tables, reading aloud. Something about the rhythm of walking and reading aloud with my ear as proofreader catches the stride of the piece. Once I hear what needs to change, and it is usually before I make the complete circle, I punch the revision into the computer, print the new draft, and begin to "walk the work" again. [The] vocabulary moves from the abstract to the specific; sentences are streamlined; meaning becomes less mysterious.

Stopping to Listen

Sidney: Once a piece of writing passes through all these phases, I share it with my writing group, a group of six writers who have been together for almost four years. It is this audience, this group critique, that lets me know if what I write reaches beyond the chambers of myself.

Bob: Input comes early when I am discovering what I have to say. I listen to my voice when I respond. Later I read the writing aloud to hear my voice. That is most valuable to me. I often hear someone else when I read . . . another voice that is sometimes a part of me, sometimes new to me. I embrace it, feel it out—learning of my own identity. I resist listening to others too much until I get the sound right, until I can move my hands to the sounds. Then I listen to overall impressions, not paying much attention to details. Again it is about the feel, seeing how someone else feels about the writing. I watch body language, note their feelings expressed and implied.

Bill: I need at this point to read my story aloud to someone else. It is better when I like and trust that person . . . but that is not really necessary. The most important thing is that it is live and it is out loud. I will pick up on things that sound false to me, parts undeveloped, deficiencies of the story. . . . I will take criticism from my audience, but [what] helps me most are my own mental notes that I have taken while reading and watching my audience react.

Nearing the End

Sidney: At this point, at least fifteen revisions have already taken place.

Bill: I put the writing away for a long time and come back to it only when I have lost a sense of familiarity with the piece.

Bernie: All of . . . my job-related writing . . . is extremely deadline-driven.

Bob: Finished? I never know until I come back to the writing—three days seems necessary . . . three because one day is needed to let the writing slip away from my consciousness. [There is] another day for freedom of thinking of it and the final day for pondering new perspectives. The piece is finished when it feels right—[the] sound, the rhythm, the feel—in my hands, in my body.

Marian Mohr says that real writers are engaged in the act of making choices, that, in fact, effective writing is simply a series of effective choices. Each of the adult writers above understands how he or she makes choices. These adult writers have learned to unravel and articulate what happens when they compose. Each one understands that he or she follows a unique process. This knowledge of their own processes empowers them as thinkers and as writers. Students deserve to have that same power. Until students have the ability to make choices and understand their own processes, writing will be a fill-in-the-blank exercise for them.

It is my job, then, to give my students the guidance and the structure and time necessary for them to recognize and articulate their individual processes. Directed freewriting is a good place to start, freewritings composed as they begin a piece or freewritings done during or after they have completed a piece, freewritings designed to direct students into their own processes:

- What did you see in your mind before you started writing?
- When did you realize you had your topic? When did you realize your topic had you?
- What did you do first? Did you outline? Freewrite? Imagine a first line? Compose a paragraph in your head? Just start writing the whole thing?
- What happened after your first line or first paragraph? Did you write quickly, not stopping? What was the tempo of the following paragraphs?
- Did you revise as you wrote? Did you write the whole draft then begin changing?
- When did you make your biggest changes? What were those changes?
- When and how did you seek response?
- How did response help you or affect the piece?
- Did you get stuck at any point? What did you do then?
- When did you realize what the piece was really about?
- When did you figure out how you wanted to end the piece?
- When did you realize the piece was finished? What told you it was finished?
- Can you outline the steps you went through to compose this piece?
- Think of your piece as an architectural structure—cottage, townhouse, building, arena, or skyscraper. How did it get built?

There are other prompts that could work. There are no right or wrong questions . . . any will do as long as the questions bring the student back into the piece and into understanding his or her individual process that is occurring. My students might do visuals or models of their process, interpret them for the class, and post them on the wall. As we see those tangible explanations, we can increase and deepen the level of our conversation about process.

In addition to guided analysis of their own processes, I intend to do more consistent modeling and articulating of my own process as my students and I write pieces together. I want them to see their teacher struggle as a writer, struggle as they do. I want them to see that I do not have formulas for beginnings, or orderly routines when I get stuck, but that, instead, I am, as they are, figuring out each and every piece on its own terms. They need to know that sometimes writers get it all figured out, and sometimes we don't, that sometimes we tear our hair, scrap a piece, and move on to the next.

My listening to them talk about their writing is crucial. They will figure out how they get and develop ideas when I stay quiet and let them talk. As they articulate what is happening with a piece, they may be able to see possibilities and solve problems in ways that I would never think of. This careful and respectful listening, I hope, will lead to real conversations about and evaluation of their writing.

So, it is the fall of a new school year. My students are writing editorials that have grown out of our Election 2000 unit. Matt's first draft on gun control looks like a finished product. Sarah's is full of details on pro-choice, a topic she has been researching in government, but her draft has no structure yet. Cicely, meanwhile, is on her third, very polished draft demanding the elimination of the death penalty. She prefers not to read it to anyone . . . yet. Kevin has no topic and is reading a car magazine. Jason has settled on the legalization of marijuana but insists that he needs headphones because he cannot concentrate without his rap music. Tomorrow, Matt will admit to me that the gun control editorial is the *same* one he has written for the last three years in social studies *and* English. Together, after a "determined" conversation, we will discover that his real passion is Internet censorship. With my prodding and cajoling, he will start over. My students know, on some level, that they are each following their own instinctive, inescapable processes, just as Sidney, Bill, Bernie, and Bob know. Tomorrow we will talk about and validate those processes, and maybe at some point, my students will learn to trust and control those processes as adult writers do.

Orlean R. Anderson is a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Reprinted with permission from The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project, *November/December 2000.*

Language in Education

The following piece examines the idea of introducing a French writing institute to support the teachers and students of French language programs in southern Louisiana. The piece, written by Charles Larroque of the National Writing Project of Acadiana (AWP), with an introduction by AWP Director Ann Dobie, examines the thought behind initiating such an institute in French-speaking Louisiana, the history and cultural significance of the language in that region, and the effort expended in getting the project off the ground. Happily, AWP's first French writing institute is now in progress, having kicked off in January of this year.

Telling the Louisiana Story

CHARLES LARROQUE

Off the banks of mainstream America, where the South ends and the West Indies begin, there is a place of bayous and prairies where life is a gumbo pot of cultures cooked slowly in a Gallic roux. This is the land of Longfellow's Evangeline, Ernest J. Gaines's Jane Pittman, and James Lee Burke's Dave Robicheaux. In this place we call Acadiana (a combination of "*Acad*ian" and "Louis*iana*"), the National Writing Project (NWP) has been telling Louisiana stories for well over a decade at its Lafayette site.

When I first became involved with the writing project back in 1991, I was teaching English language arts and French as a second language in Lafayette Parish. At the time, my professional spark was starting to flicker dangerously low. On the English front, whole language versus phonics was taking its toll; and in foreign language affairs, lines were being drawn between the traditional structuralists and the advocates of a communicative approach to second-language learning. Those were trying times. But through the unflagging support and nourishment of the NWP, I came to view myself as a capable professional with new competencies, a bona fide writer, and even a leader.

But while south Louisiana was rapidly becoming more mainstream American, the younger generation was losing touch with its roots—roots anchored mainly in the French language of the Cajuns, Creoles, and the most culturally isolated, the Native Americans. The older generation, whose cultural identity was based on oral tradition, was not passing on its "voice." They saw no need to. In a world of modern technology and postmodern values, they believed their voice had no place.

History of an Endangered Culture

From the establishment of the permanent French colony in 1699 until 1921 when the Louisiana state legislature forbade the

continued on page 36

Writing, in French: A Little Background

ANN DOBIE

The idea for a French writing institute has been around for years. Sometimes referred to as Ecrire et Enseigner ("to write and to teach"), such an institute was a natural in French-speaking south Louisiana, but, like many good projects, its realization was delayed while people looked for the funding to put it in place. The money finally came when Nicole Boudreaux and Sandy LaBry, both teacher-consultants with the National Writing Project of Acadiana (AWP), secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Then, all they had to do was find a teacher-consultant who could (and would) serve as the instructor of record at the University of Louisiana, secure cooperation from the English Department, Modern Languages Department, and the College of Education, and get teacher tuition waivers from the State Department of Education to cover registration fees. None of it was easy.

It didn't take long, however, to realize that all of the forms and letters were worth the effort. Twenty teachers, all of them involved in the French immersion and bilingual programs that operate in five Louisiana parishes, were selected to participate in AWP's French writing institute. This institute follows the same model as the summer invitational institute. In fact, the two institutes differ only in that, since most of the fellows involved in the French writing institute are native French speakers from Quebec, New Brunswick, Belgium, Haiti, Niger, and France, the institute is conducted in their primary language. Beyond that, a writing project institute is a writing project institute. With Nicole Boudreaux (an emigré from Grenoble, France) serving as director, the fellows write, give demonstrations, and discuss classroom strategies. They

continued on page 38

Although Larroque's piece specifically addresses the needs of "French-speaking Louisiana," his acknowledgment of similar situations with other languages within the NWP network reflects the greater reach of the issue. The accompanying article, "Toward an Urban New York Spanish Curriculum" by Nathan Dudley of the New York City Writing Project, gives further credence to the breadth of the issue of language in education by exploring some of the day-to-day issues educators face.

Toward an Urban New York Spanish Curriculum

NATHAN DUDLEY

Language scholars seem to pretty much agree, and the casual empirical data of my experience have confirmed, that immersion works best for language acquisition. People learn to speak when they have to and want to, and it sticks through repetition, much as children learn their native languages. Independent of whether learners are more structural/grammatical learners or more experimental learners, language acquisition requires the constant reinforcement that comes from being surrounded by language.

The United States is a language-arrogant country. Geographically and economically, we can afford to be. So how can we ever expect the current high school model of forty-five isolated minutes a day, four to five times a week, to have any real effect on students? There is no constant reinforcement of the language and no necessity to speak it beyond the forty-five-minute period. "You have to go to the country, or get a girlfriend who speaks only French. That's the only way," my frustrated high school French teacher used to say.

Crystal will not speak Spanish in class, no matter how hard I work to get her to say a word. She is afraid. The black students in class razz her. "You are Puerto Rican, how come you don't speak?" Sometimes they even give the right answer after Crystal has gone through her tongue-tied, "I can't say it mister." She is caught in the "I should speak, but I don't, so I won't" mentality that afflicts many second generation immigrants who don't want to look bad in front of their peers.

The lack of immersion does not begin to address the problems of teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers in the same class. Teaching the "middle" bores the already-speaking and loses those without any background.

Kylean has a big booming voice: "Hole-ah seen-yor, what's up?"

"Como estas?" I say. She mimics me. At least she tries, I say to myself. Her personality is so "out there" and she is so sure of herself that she doesn't mind making mistakes in the language. I wish everyone would try to speak like she does. Too bad she never does any homework.

I am looking for ways to have students reach new plateaus in foreign language, when almost everything around them works against such a development. Motivation is fundamental for language acquisition and the forty-five-minutes-a-day model allows for an "out."

Of my forty-seven students in first- or second-year Spanish, more than half come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, but perhaps only ten show any real motivation in class. The most motivated is a Pakistani girl who already speaks five languages (Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, and English). A show of hands in class shows me that five out of the forty-seven do more than one hour of homework for class per week. And I assign homework, believe me.

Tayaba and Alexis turn in their restaurant project entitled "El Submarino Amarillo." It includes a full-color menu complete with photos of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Beatles. Their dialogue is three times longer than any other group's and more interesting. The restaurant diagram is on posterboard, with a yellow submarine as part of the dining room floor. Everything is in Spanish. They more than "get it." They embrace it. A couple of other groups come close to embracing the project, but none quite like this.

So where does it come from, the urge to reach new language plateaus, the urge to get "drunk" on the language, or simply embrace a project? What can be the motivational constant that can engage the students? Is it possible to create an immersion model in high school? And would it be fair to all students, regardless of their language background?

continued on page 38

Louisiana Story

continued from page 34

speaking of French on public school grounds, the Louisiana story had been told in authentic voice: in New Orleans salons in the language of Molière, in the sugarcane fields in the dialect of West African Creoles, and along moss-draped bayous in the eighteenth-century French of the deported *Acadiens* ("Cajuns" to the English ear). At the turn of the last century, the winds of assimilation began to pick up with the discovery of oil and the tremendous influx of that industry's interests. The inhabitants of Depression-era Louisiana needed little convincing that English was to be their economic ticket to the American dream. But then, as today, there was a quid pro quo.

Too many are the horror stories from this time of Francophone Cajun and Creole children punished and humiliated for speaking French on the school grounds—even to the extent of soiling themselves because they did not know how to ask permission in English to go to the restroom. The parents of these children sadly realized that English would invariably become the key to economic success for those struggling against great odds: the Cajuns who had been so traumatically deported from Nova Scotia; the African-Americans and their long quest for true freedom; and the Native Americans, who so often found themselves on the lowest rung of society.

After World War II, a national preoccupation with regional diversity emerged, resulting in a call to protect an endangered Louisiana French language and culture. In 1968, the state created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). CODOFIL's mission has been a daunting one: the council is charged with preserving a language whose function has increasingly become limited to plaintive songs, kitchen gossip, and secret codes to confound the likes of children and Texas shrimpers. Today, Louisiana French may be the main feature at folk-life festivals, but it is no longer the lingua franca that was once prevalent in commerce, communications, and wider social settings.

At the time of this transition, it was believed that if the school system was responsible for eliminating French, then this institution should redeem itself by bringing about a renewal of that language. Toward that end, the state implemented what came to be considered the nation's preeminent second-language program, and today over 100,000 students are enrolled in a French language program (including over 2,000 students of French immersion). But this reversal was not an easy one. Many French-speaking parents, traumatized by their own school experiences, openly resisted a movement that asked them to simply forget the stigmatization of the past and embrace the idea that it was again acceptable to speak French. Their confusion over these conflicting messages was exceeded only by their profound suspicion of the educational system.

In spite of its precarious start, the state's second-language program has become a popular one. Its success, however, has been limited primarily to the classroom. A bridge has yet to be built between the schools and the larger community where French once thrived. So far, no one has presented a plan for taking French language learning to the next level. No one has stepped forward with a vision of how to give function to the linguistic notions or how to make connections between culturally disenfranchised children and an older generation just now recovering from the cultural shaming they endured in the past. No one yet has been able to galvanize teachers, empower students, and show—not tell—a community of survivors how to put its voice in the first person.

Did somebody say National Writing Project?

Teachers Teaching *Enseignants*

Pourquoi pas? Why not the National Writing Project? Who better to foster leadership among the ranks of teachers frustrated with an exemplary program that seems, so to speak, all dressed up with no place to go? Who better to help schools address issues of reform such as standards, strategies of change, sharing of knowledge, and building mutual respect between colleagues who share the same vision but maybe aren't "speaking the same language"? The NWP is about awareness. The NWP is about dialogue.

To paraphrase Voltaire, you've got to cultivate your own garden. As a writing project fellow, I have seen firsthand how the summer institute provides teachers with not only the tools but indeed the seeds. Applied to a French writing institute, NWP's reliable techniques and approaches offer opportunities for growth heretofore unimagined in second-language instruction.

The NWP has been a champion for celebrating local voices. At our own Acadiana site at the University of Louisiana (which is also the site of the nation's only doctoral program in Francophone studies), teachers and their students have become enthusiastic ethnographers, uncovering the untold and giving voice to the fading. Invariably, however, research often falls short when the trail leads to a story told in French and the urge to translate becomes the first yank of cultural disconnect. The NWP offers second-language teachers a model for becoming true cultural stewards, educational experts in the preservation and development of ethnic diversity.

The writing project model has a certain je ne sais quoi about it that crystallizes a teacher's self-image and introduces him to the idea of activism for professional and social development. The teacher-as-writer responds, and a responsive teacher is a proactive one. That's a positive thing in this state, where reform can be as slow as a meandering bayou and therefore needs a good mainstream current. With a corps of culturally responsive teacher-consultants armed with leadership skills and paradigm shifts, NWP's professional development becomes community development, giving new meaning to the idea of "lifelong learners."

Ultimately, the writing project's influence could address the second-language teacher's greatest frustration: the paradox of the fluent student who has absolutely nothing to say. With over 200,000 native French speakers in Louisiana, there is no excuse not to tap into the remaining vibrant linguistic tradition. French teachers, through the experience of a summer institute *en français*, could expand their knowledge of the writing process and delve into a whole new dimension of the communicative curriculum. Teachers and their students, across the curriculum, would finally make real connections between a second language and social function.

Gumbo Diplomacy: Issues and Initiatives

The writing project could reveal a multitude of opportunities for focusing on topics crucial to a part of America where French is not a "foreign" language. Rural issues, for example, are significant in giving a sense of place and direction for Creoles and Cajuns who have been living in exquisite exile for more than two centuries. Cultural isolation offered a sense of security to those traumatized by slavery and deportation; however, "isolation" is often equated with "marginalization," which invariably spawns cultural identity crisis.

Another element essential in any model to genuinely revive the French language in Louisiana is the school-to-work concept. For example, if the current phenomenon of Louisiana as a popular cultural tourist destination can be justly attributed to its still-living French heritage, then it makes sense to do whatever is necessary to preserve and enhance that culture's special character. A good starting point would be the formation of a bilingual workforce in the hospitality field. The education system would ensure linguistic competency in the work language and, more importantly, the accurate interpretation of the French Louisiana experience. French as a second language would then become the language of the workforce. Here is the payoff for the student who says, "French is okay for me and Grandma on Sundays, but, *excusez-moi*, is that all there is?"

Finally, networking—especially with Hispanic programs/writing institutes within the NWP—is crucial to any reform in a second-language program. The French and Spanish interests share much common ground, and dialogue can only enhance the development of teaching philosophies, strategies, and community development.

NWP outreach to French Louisiana (and why not French New England as well?) could contribute a whole new dimension to a new whole language by validating a vanishing linguistic tradition, creating a renaissance of cultural identity and pride, and reconciling a banished community to the schools, now true partners in education. The community would become intertwined with the classroom where students could find real answers to their inquiries such as, "What is the difference between Cajun and Creole?" and "What was so wrong about speaking French?" And in responding to these student-based inquiries, the older generation Francophones would implicitly receive permission to honor and to speak their mother tongue.

We no longer need to present culture to students as an "exquisite corpse." As writers, we no longer need to preoccupy ourselves with only the pathos of fading voices, fading folks. The time is right for the NWP and its network of sites to collaborate with those who will observe, question, and respond in ways that will continue bringing people together. Who is to say that the National Writing Project would not be the essential ingredient to a promising future for the thousands of students in Louisiana and beyond? *C'est naturel.*

Charles Larroque, a native of Jeanerette, Louisiana, has spent over twenty years as an educator (foreign languages and social studies) and is currently teaching in Lafayette Parish's alternative program, "Continuing Academic Program for Students." He is a teacher-consultant with the National Writing Project of Acadiana in Lafayette, Louisiana, and a presenter for the French Writing Institute there.

Spanish

continued from page 35

And motivation? If students are not motivated in forty-five minutes, why would they be more motivated in a longer class? This calls for the creation of a new curriculum that creates units straight from their lives to teach language-related skills. Such a curriculum would include long-term projects with oral presentations, skits, and many dialogues. There would also have to be some sort of language lab, to actively listen and practice both comprehension and speaking.

Felicia and Lisa are hard workers. They don't understand a lick of Spanish and get a satisfactory mark simply because of their hard work. I ask them in Spanish about their project. "What?" is the inevitable reply. How can the written work be so good and so little transfer have taken place?

Paulo Freire understood language literacy for adults as something that could be taught only when the learners have a direct relationship with the content they are learning. Freirean lessons that I have taught in Brazil and Nicaragua always involve a simple important concept taken from the daily lives of the students. I haven't yet seen any Spanish texts that relate to my students' lives, texts that treat language as the living, changing entity it is. Perhaps the Spanish-speaking students could be engaged to come up with a list of the "Spanglish" words in use, and to teach those who may not come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Perhaps whole units could be devised out of this list. For example: *"pagar la renta."* Since *renta* doesn't exist in "correct" Spanish, connections could be made to the cultural history of New York that led to the development of new "Spanglish" words and phrases.

Toward an urban New York Spanish curriculum is where I am headed. In my Spanish class, I struggle to grab my students' interests, creating a focus in order to teach the language. Immersion may allow some real language acquisition to take place. But will my students meet me halfway in the language-arrogant culture in which we are all immersed?

Nathan Dudley, formerly a Spanish teacher at Manhattan Village Academy, currently teaches economics and history at Schomburg Satellite Academy in the South Bronx. He has worked for five years in the New York City Public Schools.

Reprinted with permission from the New York City Writing Project Newsletter, *Fall 2000.*

Writing, In French

continued from page 34

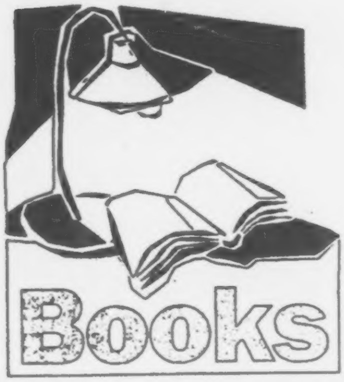
participate in presentations given by AWP teacher-consultants, and they share their writing in reading and response groups. They are "teachers teaching teachers"... in French.

The French writing institute is particularly exciting because of the support it will lend to the participating teachers and, by extension, to the French immersion program. Because parents in this region are eager for their children to value their cultural heritage, the French immersion program has become a popular alternative to customary schooling. As Charles Larroque points out in "Telling the Louisiana Story," (see article, page 34), language is a fundamental part of any culture, and when the traditional one disappears, as French so nearly did among the Acadian and Creole peoples, memories and traditions fade with it. A critical part of family and personal identity is lost. Going to school in French is one way to keep that history alive and that culture ongoing.

Although the purpose of the French immerson program—to transmit a cultural heritage—may be fairly abstract and general, the means used to achieve it are quite specific. To produce bilingual students who are as proficient in French as they are in English, teachers present subject matter en français. And since writing is fundamental to all learning, attention to writing in French is a major part of the curriculum.

How the writing project—and specifically the French writing institute—fits into this scheme, then, is readily apparent. And people most closely associated with the new institute are quite upbeat about that fit. Sandy LaBry, who serves as language arts supervisor for Lafayette Parish, has been struck by the enthusiasm with which the French fellows have welcomed the institute. "The participants are as energized as those in any writing project institute I've ever visited," she noted. "I believe that we will see the fruits of our collaborative labors in even stronger instruction in the classrooms, in satisfied teachers who nurture their own self-expression through writing, and in a broad and varied selection of workshop offerings for audiences who speak French."

To this Nicole Boudreaux simply adds that she has never worked harder—or had more fun. And that simple statement—whether in English or in French—says a lot.

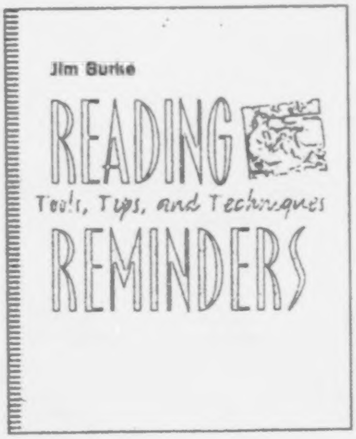


Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques

REVIEWED BY JANE BRAUNGER

by Jim Burke. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000. $25.00; 327 pages plus appendices.
ISBN 0-86709-500-8.

I came across *Reading Reminders* just as I was finishing Lynne Sharon Schwartz's passionate advocacy of reading, *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books*. Jim Burke may not have been exactly ruined by reading, but like Schwartz, he is a voracious and appreciative reader. Like Schwartz, he approaches this collection of practical advice about reading in the secondary school as an advocate. He wants to help busy teachers reconnect with the reasons they read, revisit some powerful classroom practices in reading, and help students internalize attitudes and strategies that will make them engaged and effective readers.



Burke's previous publications, *I Hear America Reading: Why We Read, What We Read* (Heinemann, 1999) and *The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession* (Heinemann, 1999) were resources for and celebrations of teaching. *Reading Reminders* continues the experience of being at a staff-room table with a knowledgeable and generous colleague.

As an English teacher who learned much of what he now knows about teaching reading on the job, Burke's mantra is "Write the book you wish you had." To this end, he has collected one hundred reminders of tips, techniques, and tools to help teachers successfully teach reading in their high school classrooms. The individual reminders are brief, each averaging two pages. Each contains a rationale and what to do; many also include examples of the technique or strategy as used by Burke's sophomore English students, whom Burke graciously credits with helping him learn how best to help them improve as readers. It's clear they're in this learning thing together. The samples of student work that he includes illustrate the power of each tool or technique as a reading strategy, so teachers in other content areas should find it easy to translate appealing strategies into their own classrooms.

An overarching reminder in the book is that adolescents are more likely to be inexperienced than unable in matters of academic literacy. Burke conveys respect for teachers and for students as knowledgeable and resourceful. He believes that students can read and learn from challenging texts if teachers consciously support them with appropriate instruction. For this collection, he has chosen classroom ideas that he has found effective in providing this support, leading students to greater independence and competence as readers. Burke acknowledges the complexity of reading and asserts its rightful place as an emphasis of secondary content instruction. This comes as a welcome response to current calls for remediation of reading problems, often through basic skills instruction that is disconnected from a rigorous, engaging curriculum.

The book's organization, as well as its content, reflects Burke's conviction that academic reading involves complementary roles for teacher and student, with extensive practice and reflection from both. Reminders in each section point to

- what teachers must do: establish a reading culture; teach and support students; evaluate your own teaching; evaluate your students;
- what students must be able to do: read a variety of texts for different purposes; use various strategies; develop their own reading capacity; evaluate and monitor their understanding, performance, and progress.

Burke acknowledges that many of the strategies and practices summarized will be familiar to teachers. He presumes that knowledgeable teachers will browse through the collection and find the practices that fit their needs. The space for marginal notes on each reminder suggests that teachers will adapt the strategies to fit their own teaching, given their texts and the needs and interests of their students. The one downside I see to this format though, is a possible impression that all the tools, tips, and techniques are equal in the expertise they require of teachers and their potential power for improving student reading. In reality, developing portfolio guidelines (reminder 35) is a more substantial undertaking than providing good directions (reminder 23), though both are arguably useful reminders to high school teachers.

Burke opens the book with the importance of creating a classroom community of readers, so it is fitting that reading reminder 1 is "Use Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)." Making space in the day for engaged reading in books of students' choice is an excellent place to start. Burke acknowledges that teachers will have to consider available time and the demands of their course in deciding how much time they will devote to SSR, but he reminds them of its effectiveness in building students' reading capacity.

One section in the second part of the book, "What Students Must Be Able to Do," is "Use Various Strategies." I like the reminder that reading strategies ultimately belong to students; the goal is to help them develop and control a range of reading processes. In this section appear reading reminders 54 through 74, including, for example, "Reciprocal Questioning (ReQuest)," "Survey Question Read-Recite-Review (SQ3R)," "Think-Alouds," and "Reciprocal Teaching." Burke is careful to note in the introduction to this section that reading strategies are more or less effective, depending on the student's need, the demands of the text, and the task involved. What's important is that students learn a variety of strategies in authentic reading experiences. In addition, they need ample opportunities to reflect on their own reading in order to determine which strategies work best for them and when. The big reminder here for teachers is to gradually recede from the picture, to shift responsibility and capability for monitoring and improving reading comprehension to their students.

The challenge for teachers in this section is to read with a purpose of choosing high-leverage strategies that meet the demands of their texts and the needs of their students. In a recent article in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Elizabeth Moje and her colleagues suggest an ecological metaphor for deciding on reading strategies: Is watering plants effective? It depends. Similarly, in reading in the content areas, the value of a strategy depends on the circumstances. And in high school classrooms, teacher, students, texts, and tasks are all part of the circumstances. So as a teacher consults *Reading Reminders*, scanning the twenty strategies listed under "Use Various Strategies," and asks "Should I teach my students how to use SQ3R? What about designing anticipation guides? Question the author?" The answer, ultimately, has to be "It depends." Burke has provided a rich collection of reading strategies but wisely reminds teachers that they must decide if and when any of them fit their classrooms.

About the strategies, I have one caution. The brief descriptions provide a rationale and key components of the practice. The upfront investment of classroom time for some, "Draw the Action," for example, need not be significant, and the directions provided in the book are adequate. Some of the strategies, however, will require more guidance for teachers, more careful scaffolding of instruction, and more commitment of class time. For example, teachers wishing to incorporate "Reciprocal Teaching (RT)" into classroom reading experiences will do well to provide instruction in as well as ample time to practice its component strategies of predicting, summarizing, questioning, and clarifying. RT uses social interaction to support engaged and effective reading of challenging texts. Teachers who commit classroom time to learning and employing RT know that the payoff for students is worth it. Students gradually internalize the component strategies they've learned through interaction with each other. Over time, they can shift gears as they read on their own to make and revise predictions, question the text, clarify their understandings, and summarize what they've learned so far.

In appendix 2, Burke makes this point more generally, referring readers to resources with in-depth treatment of key strategies and ideas he has included in the book. Here readers will find a rich collection of references on important topics related to reading, among them "Student Engagement," "Reading Across the Curriculum/Academic Literacy," "Standards," "English-Language Learners," "Using and Developing Questions," and "Reading Media."

This is just one of forty-three appendices Burke supplies. Many are graphic organizers designed to be enlarged and reproduced for classroom use, for example the Cornell Note-Taking Form, Semantic Map, Vocabulary Square, and Story Board. Others, like his very helpful collection of reading standards in various discipline areas (appendix 32) will assist teachers as they plan instruction to support student reading in their content areas. The appendices remind me of Regie Routman's blue pages, with their "here's something you might find useful" invitation.

Reading Reminders is an invitation and a gift. Burke invites teachers to see that teaching reading in their discipline *is* teaching their discipline. The gift is his wide-ranging collection of ideas to make this a reality in classrooms with a variety of students, texts, and content.

Jane Braunger is a senior research associate with the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd, Oakland, California.

Call for Manuscripts

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and the teaching of writing, as well as engaging reports by writing teachers on the research they conduct in their classrooms. Articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by teachers or researchers that address the following themes:

- balancing process and product in the classroom
- exploring connections between writing and reading
- grounding student writing in community
- evaluating how a teacher's personal writing practice relates to the teaching of writing
- examining the impact of educational standards on writing education.

If you have an idea for an article addressing one of these themes, or an idea for an article of general interest to writing teachers and researchers, give us a call at (510) 642-0976; send a query letter, draft, or completed manuscript to: *The Quarterly,* National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042; or email us at *editors@writingproject.org*. For complete writer's guidelines, please visit our Web site at *www.writingproject.org*, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

NWP

The Quarterly is a publication of the National Writing Project.

EDITORS: Amy Bauman
Art Peterson
DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Rebekah Truemper
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR: Roxanne Barber
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Richard Sterling
CODIRECTORS: Judy Buchanan
Elyse Eidman-Aadahl
Mary Ann Smith
FINANCE DIRECTOR: Michel Mathis

Support for this publication is provided to the National Writing Project from the U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

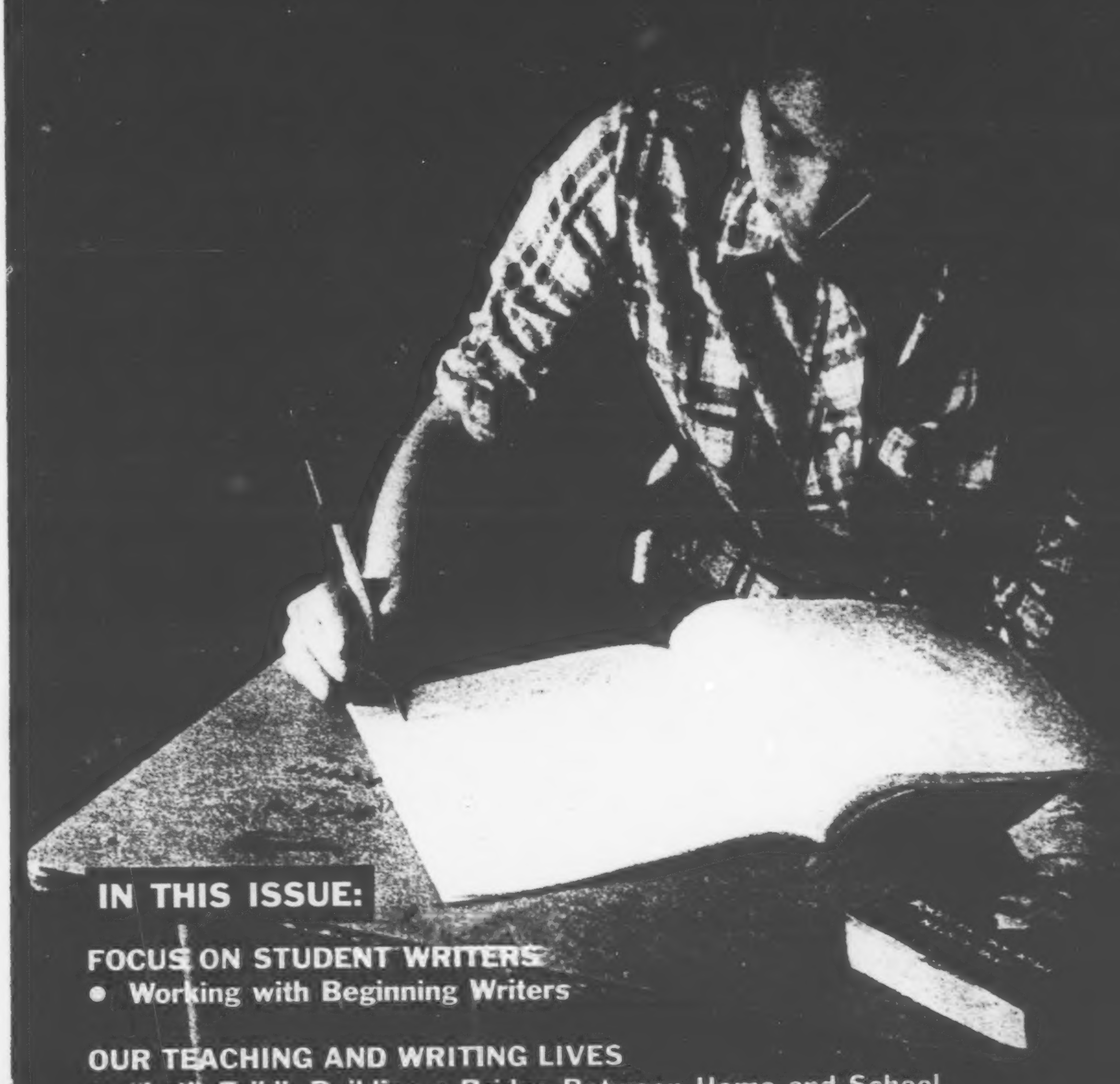
ISSN 08963592

University of California
National Writing Project
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
University of California

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Summer 2001 • Volume 23, Number 3



IN THIS ISSUE:

FOCUS ON STUDENT WRITERS
- Working with Beginning Writers

OUR TEACHING AND WRITING LIVES
- "Let's Talk": Building a Bridge Between Home and School

CLASSROOM PRACTICES
- Episodic Fiction: Another Way to Tell a Story

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Summer 2001 • Volume 23, Number 3

FOCUS ON STUDENT WRITERS

Tensing Up
Moving From Fluency to Flair 2
SUZANNE LINEBARGER

We All Have "Lots of Yesterdays"
How Creative Nonfiction Enlivens the Secondary Writing Classroom 8
MEREDITH EASTBURN WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVE WINTER

Working with Beginning Writers 13
ALISA DANIEL

OUR TEACHING AND WRITING LIVES

"Let's Talk"
Building a Bridge Between Home and School 18
CATHERINE HUMPHREY

A Voice That Is Heard
Living the Writing Project Philosophy as Coaches 25
SIDNIE MYRICK

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Episodic Fiction
Another Way to Tell a Story 29
PEN CAMPBELL AND DAN HOLT

BOOKS

Teaching Reading in Middle School
A Strategic Approach to Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking 37
BY LAURA ROBB
REVIEWED BY SUZANNE CHERRY

A Composition of Consciousness
Roads of Reflection from Freire to Elbow 38
BY PATRICIA H. PERRY
REVIEWED BY MONIE HAYES

Cover photo by Elizabeth Crews.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Tensing Up

Moving From Fluency to Flair

SUZANNE LINEBARGER

I needed to find out how to move from developing confident writers to developing really good writers who knew the difference between getting words down and writing well.

Developing fluency in young writers is easy. I know; I've been doing it for years. Colleagues constantly ask me how I get my students to write so much, and while the answers seem pat, there really are only a few simple coaching techniques that lead to fluent writers. No matter how much we may want to bypass developing fluency, there are no shortcuts. Good writers are fluent writers. However, all fluent writers are not good writers. I'm interested in not only developing fluency, but in what it takes to move our writers from just being able to write, to being able to write with passion and flair. Nevertheless, we begin always with fluency. The key word here is "begin." Fluency is a place to start, not the goal itself.

The first step in developing fluency is obvious. Our students need to write daily for a variety of purposes and audiences. The teacher who has the time to read all of her students' writing is simply not asking for enough writing. The purpose of this type of informal writing is to use writing as a support for learning. It is not to assess a student's writing ability. Informal writing includes a wide variety of writing experiences, such as:

- quick writes, which are motivating and allow for enough student choice to ensure that all students have something to write about
- writing in response to reading, including learning logs and response journals
- writing to solve problems, from math to social problems
- writing to complain
- writing to summarize.

This writing not only increases the student's ability to write, but demonstrates multiple uses for writing. At best, these invitations to write eventually include all students—something for everyone.

Next, the classroom environment must be designed to support fluency. Students constantly ask, "How much do we have to write?" The response to that question needs to be, "I won't tell you 'how much,' but I *will* tell you how long." Setting a timer allows the teacher to impose a limit on students' writing (even if it's his name over and over). This is one way to discourage the "I'm done" syndrome. In my classroom, being done is not the goal; perseverance is.

Further, behavior expectations must be clear. I expect my students to take risks, make mistakes, and share what they write, but I am not orchestrating a sixties love fest. My expectations are high. However, it is also my job to provide an environment in which all students can succeed. Even my weakest writer can write for ten minutes and manage to say something worthwhile.

I don't expect my students to have great ideas, but they do need to have ideas. We work hard to make sure everyone has something to say, and then it's up to the individual to actually say it. No one gets to choose to not participate.

Another important factor in building fluency is the sharing of writing. Motivation for informal writing remains high when informal writing is paired with informal sharing. My students are required to share what they have written. This sharing time is simple and unstructured. The instructions aren't fancy: "Find someone close to you to share with and do it. You have ten minutes." The purpose of this sharing is to quickly explore ideas, and I'm not a player in the process. When I get involved, the purpose of sharing immediately becomes evaluative rather than interactive. Interaction is a key to motivation, and it's the interaction that keeps everyone writing.

So yes, my students are fluent—especially after the two years they spend with me in our third and fourth grade loop. But after they build this fluency, my response must be, "So what?" Really, so what? For years, I've had no trouble getting students to write a lot about a little. In far too many classrooms, that is where writing development stops. Our writing project mantra, "fluency, form, correctness," too often gets mired down in the development of fluency. Year after year, young writers build their self-esteem based on how much they've written, not on how well they've written. I needed to find out how to move from developing confident writers to developing really good writers who knew the difference between getting words down and writing well.

My goal was not only for my own students, but for the students working with other teachers in the Northern California Writing Project. In my role as inservice director for our site, teachers looked to me for ways to improve their students' scores on holistically scored writing samples as well as in writing in the content areas.

As I have thought through how to best help my students and the teachers with whom I work, I have come to the understanding that an increase in writing activities alone does not necessarily lead to improvement in the craft of writing. If writers are to develop more than fluency, writing teachers must coach students in the skills essential to writing with flair. For me this has been an evolving understanding. I have, in fact, been coaching writing as long as I have been teaching it. In the early days, I could hear my coaching voice in my third-graders' writing. Ray's writing (below) reflects what his teacher asked him to do. You can almost hear me asking students to limit their "I remember" piece to one incident, to include sensory details, to describe the setting, and to make sure the incident actually has an ending.

> ***Skiing Struggle***
>
> *I remember the time I went skiing on Mount Shasta on April 18, 1994. I was wearing a coat, turtleneck, fleece sweatpants, wind pants, ski hat, ski goggles, socks, and ski boots.*
>
> *On my first run, I skied perfect, and it was the first time I skied in 1994! On my second run, I took one harder. It was called "downhill" because it was exactly like a course without the gates. It was really steep.*
>
> *After that we went back to the van and had lunch. I had tuna and hot chocolate.*
>
> *Then we went back up. On the chair lift [I] saw one ski pole and a glove. When we got to the top we took a new run.*
>
> *We took about ten more runs and went home.*

Ray is a competent third grade writer. His spelling and punctuation are perfect. He wants to please his teacher. He is able to check off everything I had asked him to do, from detailing what he saw to listing what he ate, and he even provides a conclusion of sorts: "We took about ten more runs and went home." So what's the problem? The problem is that nothing happens. He's writing because he's supposed to, not because he has something that he really wants to say. This is not the gift of writing that I wanted to give to my students.

About the same time as I was struggling with my need to move my writers from fluency to flair, two of my writing project colleagues, Ron Scudder, a middle school teacher, and Kevin Dolan, a high school teacher, were struggling with the same demons. We began to search for current work on the craft of writing that reflected the ability of good writing teachers. We examined our own students' writing and discovered common elements that made their writing sing to us. And then we set about searching for ways to give the gift of the writer's craft to all our students.

My students began keeping writer's notebooks that celebrated the writer's craft . . . theirs and others. Ron, Kevin, and I copied Patricia Pollacco's line, "She had a voice like slow thunder and sweet rain," from *Chicken Sunday* and wished we had written it. Kevin coached his students in the use of juxtaposition, placing interesting ideas side by side, and Ron worked with identifying tension in student writing the way Ralph Fletcher describes it in *What a Writer Needs:*

> *Now the story becomes interesting. This is such a fundamental expectation that while we read we are always on edge, slightly tense, awaiting the first signs of calamity. We actually*

> *get disappointed when events unfold smoothly: Nothing is happening (101).*

All of these approaches are less directly prescriptive than the kind of direct coaching I had engaged in at the time Ray wrote "Skiing Struggle." But it is Fletcher's and, by extension, Ron's notion of tension that has now had the greatest impact on my teaching. By tension I do not mean conflict. I don't spend much time discussing conflict with my students. They think conflict means a fight between good guys and bad guys and that's it. But the notion of tension is one that they can really grab on to and actually use as they write.

I explain it with rubber bands. As I hand them out, I tell my students to leave the rubber bands on their desks. "Don't touch them." Of course, they are jittery waiting to get their hands on the bands and "accidentally" shoot them off. As they wait, I take a large one and just dangle it on my finger. However, when I stretch it out and point it (not at a student), the rubber band suddenly becomes more interesting. It's the tension, the potential energy that rivets our attention. It's the same in their writing. Too often, students believe humor or fear are the only elements that make writing engaging. I believe that tension is a much better place to start. The difference is illustrated in Derek's "I remember" piece.

> ***Skiing Struggle***
>
> *I was at the Mount Shasta Ski Resort on a Sunday. Everything was fine. I was having a fun time there, but one run was not very much fun.*
>
> *I had to start off on steep slope. It might have fun for the rest of the family (including Ray, my dad, and my mom), but it was a struggle for me. The snow was almost as hard as ice. I had to turn and stop and turn and stop all the way down the mountain. Every time I turned, the snow crunched, and finally I had made it down that run.*
>
> *After we made it down that run, it lead us to a chair lift that was brand new, so we decided to take that chair to see where it went.*
>
> *When we got to the top, it looked like we were in the clouds. We went on to a run that was just as steep and icy as the one before, but this time it was worse because it took me about an hour to get through that run. One time I fell and slid, but my dad caught me.*
>
> *I never went on that terrible, no good, icy, sliding run again!*

The similarity in the two third grade pieces is not a coincidence. Derek is Ray's little brother. His writing is in no way stronger than his brother's. The difference in the writing clearly reflects the difference in coaching. Derek has a sense of his audience. Even his line, "Everything was fine," lets us know that everything wasn't fine. We understand that the entire family, except for Derek, was confident on the runs, and we get the feeling that they were probably unaware of his tension. His details are included for a purpose. He wants us to know that this was indeed a challenging run, not a wimpy bunny hill. Finally, he demonstrates an ability to work his writer's craft as he closes with his version of Judith Viorst's line from *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.*

One way I demonstrate the use of tension to students is through children's literature. I look for tension and develop ways to bring it into our discussion of a piece. There are plenty of wonderful choices. In *Ira Sleeps Over,* by Bernard Waber, Ira wants to bring his teddy bear when he goes to spend the night at Reggie's house. His parents assure him that Reggie won't laugh. His sister says, "He'll laugh." The tension is set and all young writers get it. The Mercer Mayer classic, *There's a Nightmare in my Closet,* is a natural for any discussion of tension with writers of all ages. *The Wednesday Surprise,* by Eve Bunting, develops a secret between Grandma and Anna. Everyone believes that Grandma is babysitting, but the reality is that Anna is teaching her to read.

Tension is inherent in all learning experiences. I tell my students that it's the tension, in my case terror, that keeps me skiing. I'm scared every time I push off and exultant every time I get to the bottom of the hill alive. My students are enthusiastic about exploring their own struggles to learn and are willing to reflect back on their experiences and see how far they've come. Nick writes:

> ***Do I Really Want to Water Ski?***
>
> *It was a hot summer day when we were going to our friend's house. When we got there they said that we were going water skiing. I was really excited. But by the time we got to Lake Oroville, I was having second thoughts. My dad and Paul were putting the boat in the water. It took a longtime so my mom, Carol, my sister, and I went down to a little shop to look around.*
>
> *Finally, my dad and Paul yelled to us to get into the boat. By now I was so sacred that I was shivering all over. The skiing order was Paul first, then me, then my sister. We all watched Paul ski. He is an excellent skier! Then it was my turn. I put on my life vest and said to myself, Relax and*

concentrate," over and over again. I was ready! My dad held onto the back of my skis to keep me balanced. I said, "Olly!" That tells the driver to go slow. I held onto the rope tight and said, "Hit it!" I was water skiing! But I was only up for about forty seconds. After I skied, I swam up to the boat and shouted, "I want to do that again!"

Now I am an excellent water skier. I love water skiing. Now I am practicing knee boarding!

Writing prompts without tension lead to flat prose that lacks life and sparkle. A third grade writing prompt reads:

> ***Personal Narrative:***
> ***"A Special Possession"***
>
> *Writing Situation: Everyone has something in his/her life that is very special or important. This possession may have been received as a gift. It may be a prize or award, or it may be something that has been bought or found.*
>
> *Directions for writing: Write about the special possession you have. Tell what it is and how you got it. Describe what it looks like. Use lots of picture words. Tell why it's special or important to you.*

In my view, this prompt is deadly. First, it assumes that all students have a special possession, when in reality many live in environments that don't lend themselves to possessions with stories. And even if a student can write about her baby blanket, what can she say? "My Noni crocheted it before I was born. I dragged it all over the house. It's faded yellow and white yarn and is now in the cedar chest as a special possession."

The prompt itself leads to flat writing without passion. By design, the writing will be filled with description that is designed to fit the prompt rather than to move the piece along.

A fourth grade prompt was a bit better, and with a little tweaking, actually worked.

> ***Personal Narrative:***
> ***"A Special Friend"***
>
> *Writing situation: Everyone has a friend—or would like to have one—that is special. This may be a friend that you had in the past, have now, or will have in the future. This friend may be the same age as you or younger or older.*
>
> *Directions for writing: Think of a friend who is special to you. Write about something your friend has done for you, you have done for your friend, or you have done together. Tell important details about when and where this happened. Tell how and why this happened. Share why it was memorable.*

At first reading, I was reminded of using a similar prompt when I was teaching at California State University, Chico. The papers were deadly. They all said something like, "My best friend is really good to me. She is always there for me," and so on. I also cringed at the line, ". . has a friend—or would like one," envisioning some poor student writing about a fantasy friend because they didn't have a real one. Nevertheless, I thought that if we brought some tension into this prompt, it would have potential for all my students. So during our prewrite discussion, we talked about how hard it is to stay friends when we're met with a challenge. Students talked about times they had let their friends down and times they had been let down and discussed how they managed to stay friends in spite of their problems. In other words, we talked about some tense situations.

And suddenly these students—all of them—had stories they were burning to tell! These are the openings of a sampling of fourth grade papers:

> ***The Hate-Like Friendship***
>
> *I used to hate Terra when we were in kindergarten. We never played together. I was jealous of her. I thought that she was better than me in rollerblading and coloring. Then in first grade we became best friends.*
>
> *I remember one of our most exciting adventures . . .*
>
> ***Stuck!***
>
> *Me and Chelsea have known each other since birth. But, I didn't say we liked each other! In fact Chelsea bought a diary so she could write, "I hate Becca," in it. Even so, now we're inseparable. And sometimes I have to admit we're pretty good when it comes to mischief-making. One of our biggest on a summer Saturday was something like this. . . .*
>
> ***My Best Friend Jessy***
>
> *When I first came to this school it was hard to make friends. I got in trouble a lot and I was lonely. Then I met Jessy . . .*

Many of the incidents they described had to do with spending the night, which for fourth-graders is always a bit tense. These essays were not negative. Our discussion had merely reminded students of incidents that had an edge.

After our discussion of this prompt, a greater percentage of student than ever before managed to produce essays that presented clear, fairly well-developed ideas. The difference was not in that these students were hand picked or gifted, nor did they all score "sixes." However, more students managed to score in the proficient range than students from many of the other classes tested.

In informational writing, tension also plays a role. I have long championed the use of powerful, well-written nonfiction or informational books in primary classrooms. Personal narrative has a role in all writing programs, but for writers to become not only fluent, but skilled, they need experiences far beyond the realm of fiction and personal narrative. I struggled with getting my students to interact with information instead of regurgitating it. Young writers love to write information books in which they copy countless facts that they can neither read nor understand. I've managed to avoid some of these problems by asking young writers to record key words instead of "notes" as they read nonfiction and then to use these key words to reconstruct their understanding of what they've read, first in a discussion and then in an essay. Darcy Weagant, a Northern California Writing Project teacher-consultant, developed this concept. I needed to fine-tune it so that it worked for my students.

In experimenting with this idea, I began to understand the connection between tension and surprise. I discovered that if I ask my students to explain what surprised them as a result of listening to an article, reading a piece, or conducting an investigation, I am able to accomplish two things. First, they have to interact with their information in order to respond, and, second, they develop another element of tension. They are tensed as they read or listen and are ready and expecting to be surprised. It's almost a competition between themselves and the writer. They are disappointed if they truly find no surprises. That usually indicates that the material they chose was too simple. When they write about these surprises, their writing comes alive in ways lacking when they write, "What I learned was. . . ."

For example, I read my students an article called "Mummies" from the "Pyramids" issue of *Kids Discover* magazine. As I read, they write down key words that strike them as important. Then they discuss the article using their note cards with their key words only. Involved in the process, students are tense, waiting to be surprised. One key word always appears: brain. They then explain that the Egyptians used a hook to pull the brain from the body through the nose. While they think they know a great deal about mummies already, this bit of information really surprises them. I extend this notion of surprise throughout their responses to reading and to larger assignments such as their "I Search" papers.

This fourth grade "I Search" paper concludes with a series of surprises:

> ***Star Wars Conclusion***
>
> *It surprised me that I didn't I find answers to lot of the questions that I have. Most of the questions that I didn't answer were the questions about prices and costs of the movie. I did find out more things about the characters and other details about the action in the movie.*
>
> *I was surprised that it took more than one person to play some parts.*
>
> *It surprised me that Imperial Walkers stood over 45 feet tall. I was surprised that R2D2 and C3PO had names for the kind of droid they are.*
>
> *My most interesting discoveries were that Darth Vader's real name was Anakin Skywalker and that blaster pistols were the most used weapons throughout the galaxy. I didn't even think Darth Vader had a name before Darth Vader. I knew he was on the light side before he was on the dark side, but I didn't know that he had that name. When I saw about the blaster pistols I thought there would be a different (sic) that was used because you don't see blaster pistols that much in the movies, but a lot of people do have them if you really think about it.*
>
> *I was surprised how hard it was to find information. The web site was always full, and when I finally got in, it didn't have that much information. Star Wars is a big thing now and I just thought there would be a lot of information on it.*
>
> *If I were to do this again, I could make it better. I would go straight for a book sooner, and I would go to the internet sooner because once I got on I did get information, but I did not have enough time to use it all. I would also interview more people. If I had more interviews it would be more interesting, because I could find out what people know ad like about Star Wars.*
>
> *I really enjoyed this project. It was fun and interesting for me and maybe for you!*

For years, I had been reading conclusions that did not convince me that the writer actually knew what he or she was writing about. They tended to rehash a list of facts mentioned earlier in the paper. By adding the element of surprise (tension), the writer becomes involved in an evaluation of the learning experience and is able to set realistic goals for a future research experience.

It's important, as I conclude, to return to the role of fluency in a writing program. Our students need to develop fluency at all levels. If a student who comes into my classroom is confident, sees himself as a writer, and is capable of writing a great deal, I can coach that writer from fluency to flair. If a writer is fearful and incapable of getting any ideas on paper, I cannot avoid the need to help that writer develop fluency. Our writers must be writing for all sorts of reasons if we are going to find the one topic that will light a spark in each of our students. My goal is not that of a minimalist. I am a maximalist. I don't want my students to merely be able to write. I want them to love to write. I want them to be great writers. I want them to have fluency, form, correctness, and pizzazz!

References

Fletcher, Ralph. 1993. *What a Writer Needs.* New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Harvey, Stephanie. 1998. *Nonfiction Matters.* York, Maine: Stenhouse.

Hindley, Joanne. 1996. *In the Company of Children.* York, Maine: Stenhouse.

Picture Books that Model Tension

Bunting, Eve. 1989. *The Wednesday Surprise.* New York: Clarion Books.

Fox, Mem. 1984. *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge.* New York: Scholastic Inc.

Giff, Patricia Reilly. 1980. *Today Was a Terrible Day.* New York: Puffin Books.

Gilman, Phoebe. 1992. *Something From Nothing.* New York: Scholastic Inc.

Polacco, Patricia. 1993. *The Bee Tree.* New York: Philomel Books.

Polacco, Patricia. 1992. *Chicken Sunday.* New York: Putman & Grosset.

Polacco, Patricia. 1994. *Pink and Say.* New York: Philomel Books.

Polacco, Patricia. 1998. *Thank-You Mr. Falker.* New York: Philomel Books.

Mayer, Mercer. 1968. *There's a Nightmare in My Closet.* New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Viorst, Judith. 1972. *Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day.* New York: Alladin Paperbacks.

Waber, Bernard. 1972. *Ira Sleeps Over.* New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Suzanne Linebarger is the inservice director for the Northern California Writing Project. She teaches third and fourth grade at Pines Elementary School in Chico, California.

Save the date Save the date Save the date Save the date

National Writing Project
Annual Meeting 2001
November 15–17

Baltimore, Maryland

Watch for online meeting updates at
www.writingproject.org

Baltimore 2001

Save the date Save the date Save the date Save the date

We All Have "Lots of Yesterdays"

How Creative Nonfiction Enlivens the Secondary Writing Classroom

MEREDITH EASTBURN

Originally, I planned to focus my project more on what the high school English curriculum lacks in the area of creative writing, but I soon realized that this young talent was where the real story lay.

Seeing the Unforeseen Benefits of a Creative Nonfiction Writers' Workshop: An Introduction

BY DAVE WINTER

I became a believer in workshops after spending three weeks as a fellow of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project's (Georgia) Advanced Summer Writing Institute during the summer of 1999. My experience as a writer meeting the expectations of my workshop colleagues convinced me of the many benefits of writing within a collaborative environment. I produced writing to meet an external deadline so that I didn't let my colleagues down. I wrote to the best of my ability because I did not want them to feel like I was wasting their time.

When through the grace of some higher power I was granted a small seminar class—Advanced Placement Language and Composition—for seniors at Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia, where I teach, I seized the opportunity to turn the class into a nonfiction writers' workshop. Every Thursday of the semester-long course, the students brought in nonfiction pieces. I provided some direction with each writing task: one week we wrote personal narratives; the next, argumentative columns. On successive Thursdays, we wrote satires—the first blunt, the second subtle. Later in the course, we wrote op-ed pieces built upon a central analogy. Some assignments I wrote with my students; others I didn't, but by establishing a clear workshop routine, I hoped to help my students become a community of writers, just as my colleagues and I had two summers before.

The students fulfilled my hopes. Their writing was consistently excellent, and their commentary on each other's writing helped each writer sharpen her piece further. I found myself to be less of a grader and more of a writing coach. Relishing this role, I even altered the school-required senior project so that it contributed to the writing community I was trying to build. Instead of the mandated MLA-format research paper leading to a project, I had the students write magazine-length feature articles about their projects. The students could pick any topic they wanted to pursue. Submitting the article became part of their project or the whole project. Acting as freelance journalists, my students became investigative reporters, and their research became authentic and primary, not bookish and secondary. One student explored and wrote about yoga; another, girls' basketball. A third researched the history of the first plank road in upstate New York. These pieces, and the deep revision that the students practiced on them, confirmed my faith that my students had become writers and that addressing nonfiction writing through workshop techniques was the way to go.

I may have counted on my students' becoming writers, but I hadn't counted on them becoming writing teachers. That's where

Meredith Eastburn surprised me. Meredith is one of those students who makes you glad you became a teacher but at the same time makes you feel myopic because she so often sees farther and broader then her teachers do—this teacher anyway. Her wonderful writing in my course (and as a star student journalist in my newspaper program) convinced me she was a gifted writer. But she saw beyond my objectives for her work: she wanted to become a teacher of writing, to promote writing, to save it, if you will, from what high school English classes often do to kill it. So in her senior project, she embarked on a noble experiment across the street at the middle school, where she hoped to inspire her own clientele of potential nonfiction-writing eighth-graders. My involvement with the National Writing Project (NWP) has convinced me that I need to be a teacher writing to be a writing teacher. But Meredith's willingness and desire to internalize and disseminate teaching strategies in creative nonfiction took me by surprise and broadened my belief that the NWP's core principles produce benefits that are often unseen yet profound. The article that follows provides proof that the writing workshop does more than produce better student writers; it can also produce literacy advocates who can see the far-reaching potential of razing the old hierarchies of our English classrooms in favor of true writing communities.

I crossed the street that separates my high school from my former middle school. Armed with my notebook, lesson plans, and a tape recorder, I entered the middle school and found Lisa Crockett's eighth grade gifted language arts class. First hall, third door on the right. The last of the twelve students in her fifth-period class straggled in as the bell rang. After they settled into their seats, Ms. Crockett introduced me, and then they were mine. I had come to talk with them about nonfiction writing; I left after four days with a renewed hope.

The project was my idea. I had this concern about high school students: typically, most don't like to write. I would fall into that crowd, too, if we referred to essay writing. Through the high school journalism staff and an AP language class, however, I was lucky enough to find a type of writing that hooked me: creative nonfiction. Though paradoxical by title, writing with the label of "creative nonfiction" made sense to me. Whether you call it essay-writing without the rules and formality, or journalistic writing with a literary twist to it, creative nonfiction let me enjoy the act of writing without having to assume the intimidating title of essayist or poet or journalist. I could just write. In his book, *Creative Nonfiction*, Philip Gerard outlines five characteristics of this genre. He stipulates that creative nonfiction must have both an obvious subject and a deeper subject, an ironic sense of immediate timelessness, a narrative voice, a reflective tone, and well-crafted language. No pressure, right?

Maybe I just liked the idea of creative nonfiction because of everything that it was *not*. It was not five paragraphs and three-part theses. It was not quote attributions and MLA format. It was not the beast that high school English classes had called the "formal essay" (most often written about another piece of literature) since the beginning of time. Worried that yet another class of students would submit to the fear of the big bad E word ("Essay") and turn its back on English classes as a whole, I was determined to give these students a taste of the good stuff early.

Eighth grade—before these kids begin the intimidating study of genre-based literature, British literature, American literature, and the ominous AP literature. Before teachers inure them with the tenets of overall structure and internal documentation. Before they mistakenly adopt the idea that English classes are boring and too restrictive. Eighth grade—while they're still innocent.

I searched through some writing books for ideas that middle school students might embrace. The public library had everything from books on creative writing, to nonfiction writing, to teaching writing, to writers' self-help. After sifting through them, I chose some exercises and techniques I wanted to try with the eighth-graders. But first, I wanted to know how they felt about writing—nonfiction writing, specifically.

Ms. Crockett, who had taught me language arts in eighth grade, told me two things about the students: one, while some students embraced creative writing, others would do anything to avoid extra work, and two, they all had some talent. Ms. Crockett described some of them as having natural talent. The others, she said, had to work hard to be successful writers. But they could do it.

"Natural talent means somebody who is lucky enough to find their voice early on and be comfortable with that instead of trying to hold it too much to fit a writing teacher's idea of what's good writing," Ms. Crockett explained.

I kept this in mind as I planned my time with the students. The first day I met with them—it was a Friday—we looked at the big picture of language arts. What did they enjoy about reading and writing? What did they think about nonfiction writing?

Heads nodded as a few students listed what they liked to read: mysteries, science fiction, fantasy—the whole spectrum of fiction. In regard to fiction, a student named Chris shared: "When they make us read [specific books], it takes a lot of the fun out of it. Because when you get to choose your own book, you get to choose your genre instead of actually having to be assigned some book. You don't want to read it; therefore you have a negative attitude towards the book."

On what they didn't like to read, the class agreed that they dreaded reading poetry. And, as I had suspected, nonfiction *also* didn't score high on the kids' list of favorite things to read or to write. When they described their limited impressions of nonfiction, they only mentioned forms such as essays, biographies, and textbooks.

Textbooks? No wonder they didn't like nonfiction.

When I asked for their reactions to school writing assignments, I had expected the groans and rolling eyes. What I hadn't expected was how hard it would be for me to tell them that writing assignments only grew more formal in high school. They would not soon receive another short-story writing assignment like the one they had just completed for Ms. Crockett in which they wrote their own mystery piece. In high school, they would learn to write essays about short stories rather than practice the art of writing these pieces themselves. I didn't want to scare them away from the very thing I was trying to promote. So somewhat self-servingly, I encouraged them to sign up for the high school newspaper staff (for which I was serving as a managing editor), knowing that this outlet would give them the opportunity to have some fun with writing nonfiction.

So what would fascinate them—or at least interest them enough to write about? They told me mysteries, opinions, personal experiences.

"I like writing things I want to write. If I have to write something I don't want to write, I hate it," said Sarah.

Sarah's words came to mind as I tried to choose an activity to do with the class the next week. I wanted something informal and without pressure—something personal. I found the exercise in Gerard's *Creative Nonfiction*: List ten identities for yourself and then brainstorm concerns and responsibilities you have in each of these identities or roles. I modified the activity slightly: instead of ten identities, I asked them to list five. We didn't have time to work with ten.

They liked it. Their favorite part: "list." Not such an intimidating verb when you compare it to "write about," "discuss," or "analyze."

My favorite part: my class of eighth-graders was filled with more than just students. I had cheerleaders, singers, magicians, artists, basketball players, computer programmers, sisters, sons, and baby-sitters.

> *Sister: It's hard to be the one my little sister looks up to.—Melanie*
>
> *Baby-sitter: I get to be an important part of their lives by reading to them and playing w/ them.—Stephanie*
>
> *Magician: I would be concerned about doing a magic trick correctly in front of a large audience.—Aneeth*
>
> *Artist: I have fun drawing, but my main concern is keeping focused. Drawing becomes frustrating.—Alex*

From this activity, they now each had a list of roles and voices they could apply to their writing. I encouraged them to keep their lists so they could refer to them for inspiration. By now I had convinced them that they could be the characters in their nonfiction writing, that they did have interesting experiences to share. Many of the students were musicians, singers, or other kinds of performers, so we talked our way through a possible piece on stage fright. They all knew about the butterflies, the fear of messing up, and, that classic piece of advice, to picture the audience naked. My point lay in the fact that experiences and feelings as simple or as common as these could make an accessible and fun writing subject. I wanted them to realize that the best source of inspiration for their writing was their own experience. And a nonfiction personal narrative could be a fine alternative to a short story when it comes to describing your first violin performance with the middle school orchestra.

From this introspection, we moved to an activity of external observation: the five senses. As Barbara Taylor notes in the book *How Porcupines Make Love*, "School seldom teaches kids how to deal with their environment" (99). The first step to dealing with your surroundings, however, must be to recognize them. So, I tried an exercise I found in Barbara Danish's *Writing as a*

Second Language. I asked the class to free-write about concrete details they were sensing at that moment. See, hear, smell, taste, feel. I wanted descriptions, not just observations, so I erased the verb "to be" from their legal vocabulary. They gave me this:

> *I hear Mrs. C laughing and the overhead buzzing as it projects its reflection on the screen.—Leslie*

> *I can hear pens and pencils pressing against desks and the soft hum of the AC.—Melanie*

> *I feel a numbing pain in my butt because of these hard chairs. My back feels strained because of the poor position I'm sitting in.—Steven*

> *The blinding sun illuminates the beautiful oranges, reds, and yellows of the changing trees.—Stephanie*

The third day, I combined the ideas of voice and observation description. In one of my library books, Bruce Ballenger and Barry Lane's *Discovering the Writer Within*, I landed on a writing activity that involved responding to a photo in the voice of one of its subjects. I distributed copies of the photo of the dustbowl that appears in every history textbook: Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. In the famous picture, taken during the Great Depression, three dirty children cling to their worried mother. The image provokes the questions: What has happened to these people? What is the mother thinking? What will become of them? I asked the students to respond to the picture by taking on the voice of one of the subjects and by describing the situation based on what they saw.

I sat down and wrote to this prompt with them. As soon as I started, I realized that the assignment lent itself more to fiction than nonfiction. But because I had suggested that the students adopt the voice of one of the photo's subjects, I still thought it would be worth trying. While I worried for a moment that the students would not know what to do, I decided to see what they wrote. They approached the activity in different ways.

> *"Dear God, please let us live." As I say a quick hopeful prayer I wonder why. Why has this happened to my daughter? Why didn't I strive for more? The second bomb raid in two weeks in our poverty-stricken town. Another bomb lands beside the lousy shelter we are in. I shield my daughters' heads from flying debris and feel a sharp pain in my back as something hits me. I listen to them cry. While I try to be strong I crumble; I try to be hopeful but I worry.—Jessica*

Jessica did try to create the voice of the mother in her response to the photo; another student inserted himself into the situation as an observer.

> *As I walked down the dark streets of an industrialized city, I notice something. Two girls are crying on what looks like the shoulders of their mother. They are covering their faces and muffling their crying to be discrete, but any onlooker could tell they were sad. They looked like they were cold and trembling, although that might have been because of their persistent tears. I expected the same of their mother, but she was still. She was in deep thought as though she was on another planet. Her eyes and eyebrows had a questioning look. She takes a ring off her finger and places it in a box. The mother then looked at a picture of her husband and began to cry.—Alex*

Behold creativity. Although they had strayed from the actual historical context of the photo, the kids proved that the assignment was worthwhile as an exercise in imagination. Once they loosened up and let their creative juices flow, their writing breathed. They liked the idea of writing in a voice other than their own. Whether that meant changing their point of view or simply the age of the speaker, they seemed to enjoy experimenting.

On my fourth and final day with them, I asked them to choose a childhood memory—good or bad—to write about in their childhood voice. I borrowed this idea from a writing assignment that I had in my own English class.

> *Today daddy and mommy said that Jennifer and me were going to get a playhouse. I'm so happy! I asked mommy and daddy for a playhouse lots of yesterdays ago. Now I'm getting one! It will be my house to clean like mommy and to fix like daddy. I can play with my babies and not worry about Jennifer pulling off my barbie's head because I can shut the door on her. She's too little for a playhouse anyway.—Stephanie*

Stephanie successfully found her "childhood" voice. This diction and her use of the present tense effectively bring her memory to life, not only reflecting that sense of immediate timelessness Gerard defines as a quality of creative nonfiction, but also the characteristic narrative voice as well. In contrast, the following excerpt from Leigh's childhood memory carries a more reflective tone—the use of the past tense contributes to this—with a narrative voice.

> *My sister Lynn loves trains. When I was three and she was four, we built trains with lawn chairs in our snowy Wisconsin driveway. When our first train was complete, it probably looked like five grungy old lawn chairs in a row, but to my sister and I, it was a beautiful masterpiece that was just as good, if not better, than any train on those "Thomas the Tank Engine" movies. We would invite dad to come out and take a ride in our one-of-a-kind, completely immobile train, and of course, he did not dare say no. We had our mom take pictures of us with our newest creation, and we planned everything around it. That night, we were very sad as we dismembered our train, and the chairs became heavy and ugly as we carried them into our garage.—Leigh*

The next example shows us two distinct attitudes. Leslie shares both the naiveté of her young perspective and the disenchantment of her slightly older point of view to create multiple layers of voice and meaning.

> *"Mom, will I ever be that big?" I used to wonder when picking my brother up from what I used to call "Big Kid" school. I can remember the way I felt when I was a little girl, always looking up at bigger kids as if they were famous. It's almost as if you're in a rush to grow up, but when you reach the stage that you looked up to in the past, it's not as great as it seems.—Leslie*

Finally: personal, true, free. The exercise affirmed my belief that the kids really had the talent in them. These eighth-graders could write. They were beginning to understand that nonfiction could be as simple as telling their own stories. And they had plenty of those, as they had proven with the exercise on childhood memories.

> *I liked the childhood story the best because it was more personal than the other ones. I got to share something that really meant something to me with the class, and I got to hear some very interesting stories about people's childhood memories. It was very easy for me because everything just flowed because I remembered it so well. My favorite part about writing is just letting ideas flow and not having to be picky about punctuation and grammar until I'm done.*

Leigh seemed ready to try anything; she wrote for the adventure.

Whether the students wrote for the fun of it or the grade in it, they proved that they had the raw ability. Originally, I planned to focus my project more on what the high school English curriculum lacks in the area of creative writing, but I soon realized that this young talent was where the real story lay. I had come to these eighth-graders ready to uncover their enthusiasm for the art of nonfiction writing; I left with a hope that I had sparked a love for writing within them. Maybe their enthusiasm will last a week—maybe until their senior year in high school. Maybe it will diminish after their first formal essay assignment in freshman English. At least now they know there's something more to nonfiction than the facts they find in textbooks.

And they are that something.

Works Cited

Ballenger, Bruce and Barry Lane. 1989. *Discovering the Writer Within: 40 Days to More Imaginative Writing.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest.

Danish, Barbara. 1981. *Writing as a Second Language.* New York: Teachers and Writers.

Gerard, Phillip. 1996. *Creative Nonfiction.* Cincinnati: Story.

Taylor, Barbara. 1972. "Film and Other Moving Media: That's Great…What's It For!" *How Porcupines Make Love.* Ed. Alan C. Purves. Lexington: Xerox College.

Meredith Eastburn is a recent graduate of Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia. This fall, she will attend Northwestern University to pursue a career in communication, writing, or art … or maybe all three. She would like to thank Sarah Robbins of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project and Kathy Brister of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for their responses to drafts of this article. Meredith would also like to thank Lisa Crockett for lending her enthusiastic eighth-graders.

Dave Winter, a fellow with the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project, teaches English at Wheeler High School in Marietta, Georgia.

Working with Beginning Writers

ALISA DANIEL

What inspires kids to write is their teacher's dedication and attitude toward the process. Students need to see their teachers write. They need to see the struggles, the thought process, the actual writing process that begins in the writer's mind and ends up on the paper.

Inspiring children to write can be difficult. Before I even begin the year with my new first-graders, I can hear their complaints and see the fear on their faces. "I don't know how to spell"; "I don't have anything to write about"; "My story is not good," they say, their eyes filling with tears.

I want a classroom of writers. I want them to come into the room excited and full of stories that they must tell . . . now! I want them to become process writers and not just product writers. I want them to enjoy the process, to understand the steps, and to *want* to write.

As I look out over the sea of new faces each year, I realize that it doesn't matter if it is a first grade class or a middle school class; the faces are the same. All are afraid of rejection by their peers; all are afraid of failure.

Teachers often ask me, "So how *do* you get your students to write?" I have asked myself the same question. And while I believe that it is important to get the students to write, it is equally important to get them to want to write and to see its value.

Modeling Is the Answer

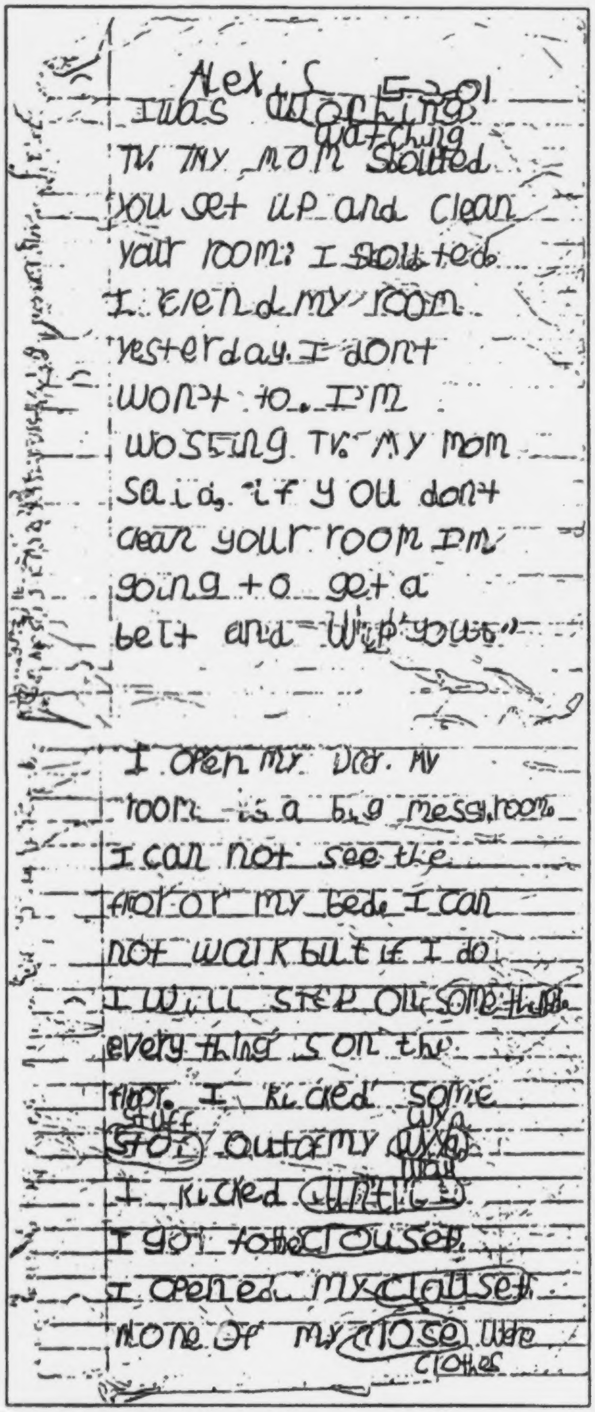
Many times, I have heard teachers remark that they don't know enough about writing to teach writing to their students. But what a teacher knows about writing is not the essential element in getting students to write. Rather, what inspires kids to write is their teacher's dedication and attitude toward the process. Students need to see their teachers write. They need to see the struggles, the thought process, the actual writing process that begins in the writer's mind and ends up on the paper.

Students need to know that the teacher values writing and that writing has a purpose. The fact that a teacher writes with her students is more important than what or how well she writes. Students appreciate their teacher's willingness to take the risk of putting writing down on paper. They pick up on the teacher's attitude and enthusiasm. If the teacher writes, the students will write. If the teacher writes because she has to cover required material, the students will write with the same attitude.

Modeling in Practice

With my first-graders, I model the very first stages of writing. Beginning with a picture, I tell my story. I add to my story a letter representing words or thoughts. Continuing to write as I talk through my process, I demonstrate pretend writing, random letter writing. I stretch my words aloud, sounding them out slowly, showing my students how to concentrate on writing the sounds that they hear. I stress that I do not have to know all of the words to tell my story. I can always come back and fix things later. For now, I only need to tell my story.

The problem with teaching the writing process to young children is that they *can't* write. They can't spell. They don't have the language or the knowledge of sound/symbol relationships needed for written expression. Many times, I have thought that



Alex S 5-2-01
I was wocching
watching
TV. my mom shouted
you get up and clean
your room: I shouted
I clend my room
yesterday. I dont
wont to. I'm
wosting TV. my mom
said, if you don't
clean your room I'm
going to get a
belt and wip you."

I open my dor. My
room is a big messy room.
I can not see the
flor or my bed. I can
not walk but if I do
I will step on somethin.
every thing is on the
floor. I kicked some
stuff
stof out of my wya
way
I kicked until
I got to the clouset.
I opened my clouset.
none of my close were
clothes

The beginning of Alexis's first draft of her story, "My Messy Room," with words circled that she wants to check for spelling.

a child was writing down a jumble of random letters only to discover upon having it read to me that the child had a beautiful story. The problem was that I couldn't read it. Now, I make sure I am looking at their papers as they read, my pen in hand, making notes on my paper so that I can decipher theirs later.

With older students, inspiring them to write can be the more difficult task. They've been around longer and understand the vulnerability of exposing themselves to others. Most would rather write a research paper than write about themselves and read their stories aloud in front of peers. Further, although older children have the skills and resources to get their words on paper, they would rather use a one-syllable word that they can spell than look up the spelling of a larger, more expressive word in the dictionary. Worse yet, they tend to write for the teacher—for what the *teacher* wants—and not for what *they*, the writers, want. Written in this way, their work often lacks expression, expressive language, or an internal connection with the writer. It is without voice. Older students like these have more to "unlearn."

Modeling writing with this group is done in much the same way as with younger students. Beginning with my chart paper and marker, I show them how to make a topic page. I write down everyday things that have happened to me, jotting down a few words or phrases that remind me of each idea. I talk through my story, telling them just enough to get a laugh or get them interested.

- I tell stories about my family. I tell about the wrestling match that my son lost. I tell it from a mom's point of view. The kids can relate. They understand the feeling of losing.
- I tell about my puppy, Myrtle, that I had in college. My friend and I took Myrtle to visit my sister in the hospital. We carried Myrtle in a large purse. The kids laugh as I tell about nearly getting caught by the nurse.
- I tell about going fishing as a child with my dad. I tell about the tournament that we won. We had three girls and no boys in the family; they can relate to my relationship with my dad as I tried to be the boy he never had.

Getting the Story Down

When I have three to five ideas on my chart, I ask the class which story they would like to hear more about. They vote and I write. Using the overhead or chart paper, I begin a very basic story, writing on every other line. I know that skipping lines will make my revision easier, so I place a small X on every other line to remind me where to start the next sentence.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Next, I add details, letting the students watch me create a story right in front of them. They hear me talk and see me write as I struggle with details, spelling, and grammar. I make a point of using words that I can't spell; I don't want them to be afraid to use "big" words because of spelling insecurities.

Getting the story down is the most important aspect at this stage of writing. Spelling is something that can be fixed later. I could waste a lot of valuable thinking time looking up a word that I might not even want to use in the final draft. Students like to hear that they don't have to worry about spelling just yet.

The students always tell me how wonderful my story is after the first draft. They know how hard it is to write, so anything I put down on paper sounds good to them. Besides, I am the teacher, and they wouldn't want to tell the teacher that her writing is bad. But I am quick to tell them that this is a first draft. It is not complete, but it is a start. I need time to rest from my story. Places where details are needed will be more evident after an opportunity to reflect.

Teaching Revision Through Surgery

Despite my insistence that a first draft is just that, it is often a struggle to get beginning writers to move beyond that draft and into revision. They think they have written all that they know about the subject in the first draft. They don't understand how to add details. To help them, I begin to model the "surgery" procedure on my story. I literally cut my story apart where I want to add details, move the bottom part of the story down, and reattach it with tape, allowing room for more writing.

Next, the students each take a turn. As each student reads aloud to the group, the listeners ask him questions. Listeners have a very important job: they point out the parts they like and they ask questions about the parts they don't understand. The reader sits with pencil in hand so that as someone asks a question about a particular section, the reader can make an asterisk at that point. At the same time, I also make notes in my notebook to remind me of the points at which listeners raised questions or comments.

photo by Alisa Daniel

Alexis shows off "My Messy Room."

Next, I hold individual conferences with each student. I work from my notes as each student reads aloud to me. At a point where details are needed, I stop the student and have her tell me that part of the story. Telling the student that the story needs a little surgery, I take the scissors and cut the paper. Using clear tape, I retape the section of the story on a new sheet of paper. Then I say, "Write down what you just told me." Next, I tape down the new section of the story. The child begins reading again, stopping at the next point needing details. Using the scissors and tape, I repeat the surgery procedure. Before long, we have a lengthy cut-and-pasted story full of new details. The parts of the story that no longer fit the story are thrown away or saved for another story. This helps the student see where they have strayed from the topic.

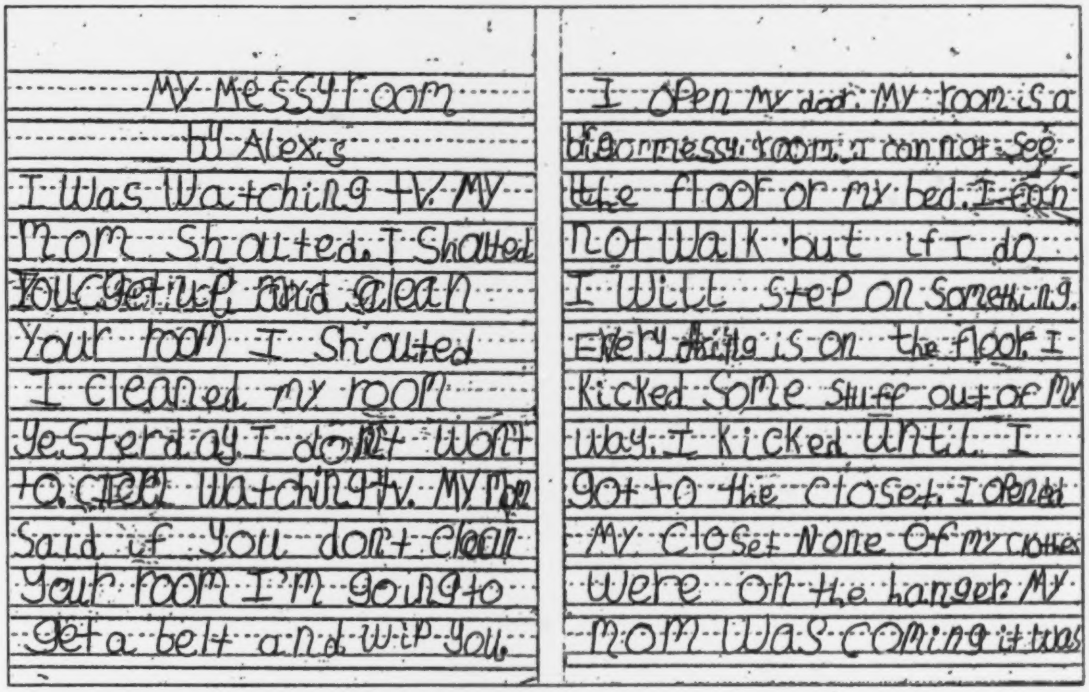
At the next group read-around, the student reads the revised story and the listeners again ask questions and make positive comments. If more surgery is needed, the reader will make an asterisk at the point of need and repeat the surgery procedure.

Revision with the Older Writer

To model the revision process, I again take out my piece of writing in progress and read it to the class. The story doesn't seem as funny or as clear as it did the day before. I mark with an asterisk places that are unclear to indicate where I will add details. I want the reader to see my story as I see it in my mind. We talk about audience. What do I want the reader to see or think about as the story is read? I keep adding details until my story is as clear to the reader as it is to me. We talk about how to make the funny parts funny and the surprising parts surprising to the reader.

I continue modeling writing in front of the class with a second reading. During the second reading, I notice several mistakes that I made because I was writing quickly and trying to get my story told. When I come across words that I want to spell check, I circle them so I can check them later. I scratch out words or phrases that don't work and add in words that I left out the day before. I use editing marks as I read. When I finish, I have such a grand mess of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



My Messy room
by Alexis
I Was Watching tV. My
mom Shouted. I Shouted
You get up and clean
Your room I Shouted
I cleaned my room
yesterday I don't wont
to clean watching tv. My mom
Said if you don't clean
your room I'm going to
get a belt and wip you.

I open my door. My room is a
big messy room. I cannot see
the floor or my bed. I can
not walk but if I do
I will step on something.
Every thing is on the floor. I
Kicked some stuff out of my
way. I kicked until I
got to the closet. I opened
My closet None of my clothes
were on the hanger. My
mom was coming it was

The beginning of Alexis's revision, after "surgery" and editing.

asterisks, splotches, and scratches that I have trouble reading my own work. It is time to write the story on a clean piece of paper or on the computer.

I have found that, once they begin in this way, my students don't mind revising. While most students think that revising means recopying, I show them that revising is a matter of cutting and taping—and that's fun. This allows the writer to see the story growing and changing without recopying it several times. Using this process, a writer can seem to go from a rough draft straight to a final copy, although he or she has actually revised the piece several times.

Editing

Finally, when the story has been told, it is time to move to the next stage of writing—the editing stage. Again, I model using the story that I have written on my chart paper or transferred to the overhead projector. As I read aloud, we pay attention to where my voice naturally stops or pauses, and often I will add a comma or period at those spots. We discuss phrases and sentences and, through example, I show them why I choose a specific punctuation mark.

I circle more words that I want to check for spelling. I introduce a dictionary, and with the younger writers, I also use a pocket chart of words. I use a plastic shoe rack that hangs over the door, labeled with the alphabet. Inside its plastic sleeves are cards made from old magazines, stickers, pictures, and store catalogs. Each card is filed alphabetically. The students sort through the pockets to find words that they need.

If the word is not there, I have them use a "try card," an idea borrowed from Reggie Routman (1991). In the first column of a sheet of paper that has been divided into three columns, the student writes out the words that he has circled in his story. I help him sound out each word and put a check mark over the words that he has correctly spelled in the first column. The child rewrites the other words in the second column. If he spells one correctly on the second try, I praise him and move on to the next word. If not, I give him the correct spelling in the third column.

Because young students are easily frustrated, the three columns work well. Some words, for example the word *night,* have silent letters that a young child might not know. They might write *nit* in the first column. I tell them about the silent letters, give them the correct spelling, and make a note of the pattern that I need to address during my next language lesson.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Spelling try cards work well with older students, too, but their cards have four columns rather than three. Each student brings her try cards along with her writing to the teacher/student conference for what becomes a quick, individualized grammar lesson. We discuss each word, and the student uses the second and third column to try new spellings. The fourth column is reserved for the correct spelling. Students keep these papers in their writing folders for future spelling reference.

Writers do an initial edit of their own papers, but I tell the students that I will be the final editor. If there are mistakes that were made in the transfer from one draft to another, I help correct them. For example, a student might have reversed letters in a word or left off a period. I look to see if at some point in the writing process, he or she knew how to use the skills that have been taught.

With older writers, I add a peer-editor review of the paper to the process. Before the piece is turned in to me, I provide the writer with a rubric that lists the skills that should be checked. Both the writer and the peer editor sign the rubric, giving the peer a shared responsibility for the piece of writing. If I find mistakes that the student pair should have caught, I call both students for a conference. Both the writer and the peer editor must take their responsibility seriously. Through this process, most errors have been corrected by the time the final copy is written.

Proofreading

Proofreading is important. We discuss how an author might feel if mistakes were found in the final copy of his or her story. Especially since other teachers and students will read the writing, the final work must be as perfect as the writer can get it. Students understand this.

The longer students write, the fewer errors their writing should contain. Although student age and ability must be considered, what is acceptable is ultimately a teacher judgment. Is the error one that will change the story? Will rewriting the story be so frustrating to the child that he will not want to write again? Has this student worked hard to do her best? Are the errors developmental and appropriate for that writer? Is it time for the teacher to simply correct the error?

What the teacher considers important must be decided by the teacher. I tend to place the most importance on the revision stage of writing. Editing can be done by someone else, but only the writer can tell the story. Additionally, from my own experience, I have found that after working with a story for too long, I no longer see the errors that are blatant to a new reader.

Writing Takes Time

Good writing takes time—a luxury we don't often have in the school setting. Whether I have my students for a whole year of school or just a short workshop in the summer, I want to inspire and motivate my students to write. I have to use all of my expertise as a writer and a teacher to help them become confident writers and human beings. It is important that we use some of our teaching time to model, demonstrate, and involve students in the writing process. If we walk beginning writers through the process a few times, they begin to understand that they can write on their own. They begin to revise on their own and understand its value. They become process writers with a product and not just product writers without an understanding of the process.

By the end of the year or the end of the workshop, I see the makings of new writers. The excitement is there, and they bombard me with it: "Look at this!"; "Listen to this new part!"; and "What do you think?" Writing comes at me from all directions. I become the student, being taught by the best: new writers with new ideas, new stories, and new enthusiasm. My desk piles up with stories to be published. What more could a writing teacher wish for?

References

Routman, Reggie. 1991. *Invitations.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Alisa Daniel is a first grade teacher at Screven County Elementary School in Sylvania, Georgia, and a co-director of the Georgia Southern Writing Project in Statesboro. She gives credit to Donna Vincent, a co-director of the Western Kentucky University Writing Project and a writing consultant for Kentucky Schools, as a resource in writing this article.

"Let's Talk"

Building a Bridge Between Home and School

CATHERINE HUMPHREY

I realized that parents were an untapped resource for both my students and me as we established a learning community based on the exchange of ideas.

Pick up your socks." "Turn down that music." "Get home at a reasonable hour." These may all be necessary demands when a parent is instructing a teenager on the nuances of reasonable social behavior, but imperatives like this hardly qualify as what the socio-linguist Maria Montano-Harmon labels "quality verbal interaction." According to Montano-Harmon, quality verbal interaction is talk between young people and adults about ideas. When a parent or teacher asks a question that begins with "What do you think about . . . ?" the adult has initiated an opening for this kind of conversation.

According to Montano-Harmon, the average quality verbal interaction in the United States today between parent and child is seventeen seconds per day. She argues that extending the time of an idea exchange for twenty minutes per day would make a substantial difference in a youth's critical thinking skills. She claims that this exchange does not even need to be twenty consecutive minutes, but can be in five- or ten-minute increments.

My own connection to Montano-Harmon's thinking came while I was working on the portfolio entry, "Outreach to Families and Community," for my National Board for Professional Teaching Certification last year. I realized that parents were an untapped resource for both my students and me as we established a learning community based on the exchange of ideas. As a teacher, I savor these exchanges with my students, and now I wanted to invite parents to join in the conversation.

Working with my two senior classes, I selected a thought-provoking editorial from the January 29, 2000, *Los Angeles Times*. The essay, "Hold Parents Liable for Learning" by David E. Kahn, an English teacher at Fremont High School in South-Central Los Angeles, made the argument that "poor parenting" is the "key factor" in our "educational crisis" and "tragic failure rate." The class and I read and discussed the essay's key points. I asked my students to take a position in agreement, disagreement, or partial agreement with the author. Kahn's radical suggestions included mandatory parent orientation sessions and ongoing parent participation—at least three hours per month—lending assistance in campus beautification and repair, tutoring, or yard and hall duty. Parents would pay for children's missed school and/or failure. "School would be free only as long as Johnny is attending and passing."

Students' pens flew as they summarized and responded to Kahn's argument. In self-selected groups, they shared their written work aloud with each other, agreeing and disagreeing with Kahn, making assertions, backing up their opinions with examples and evidence, coming to conclusions. I wanted them to take home some of the energy we were generating. What would their parents think of Kahn's proposals? I asked students to discuss his arguments with their families and bring their parents' ideas back to class.

I was delighted when many students arrived in class the next day with stories of lively and thoughtful conversations with their parents. Amy's mother surprised me by writing her ideas as an "essay" and giving it to her daughter to bring to class. Her mother wrote, "I agree whole heartedly with Mr. Kahn, even though some of his suggestions are off the wall. But he does have the basic concept .... Parents, take responsibility for your children and stop passing the buck." She concluded her paper with a plea for her two daughters to have "good, strong, responsible" teachers, "to help me in my goal of raising well-rounded, educated girls." I made comments (not corrections) on the paper, inviting Amy's mom to continue the dialogue, and sent it back home with Amy. This exchange particularly pleased me because, based on high absenteeism, missed assignments, and incomplete written work, Amy had just finished the first semester in our senior English class with a D-. Now in our first week of the second semester, Amy finally seemed interested in writing a paper of her own, after observing her mother sending an "essay" to school.

photo by Catherine Humphrey

Students in Humphrey's class are engaged in sharing ideas and sharing their writing.

Encouraged, I sent a second editorial home with all my seniors, "A Martinet Helped Us Learn," by ninth grade teacher Gail Saunders, (*Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 2000). When Amy's mother responded again with an essay, Amy was hooked. In Saunder's opinion piece, she argues that the mean "Marquis de Sade of physical education" teacher she had as a student in school did her and her classmates a favor by "making" them participate. "As long as you were not comatose or in the hospital, you would be in class participating." The student with the note from home and a finger in a splint was still "seen dribbling a ball around the court that day." With a series of examples, Saunders demonstrates that in her student experience "no one questioned authority ... none felt abused," and "none of the parents ever complained," because students and parents knew "it was good for us ... we learned not to be wimps, and we learned not to blow small incidents out of proportion. We didn't whine about our rights because the teacher didn't talk to us like the maitre d' in a five-star restaurant, and we didn't try to get her fired because of it. We simply learned to tough it out." Saunders concludes that learning to "swallow our lumps and move on" builds character instead of encouraging whiners.

Students and parents had a lot to say in responding to Saunders' argument. Perhaps surprisingly, most agreed with her. Amy, working on her own essay, armed with her mother's response and their conversation, said to me, "We'd all get better grades in here if we did this kind of writing workshop more often." Amy was finally writing more than a few simple sentences and trying to pass them off as an essay; she began to write paragraphs, and, for the first time, she filled an entire page. Amy discovered for herself that writing is the communication of ideas, and by June she passed her senior English class with a C.

I learned from this experience that for Amy to become interested in participating in writing assignments she had to believe that the writing she did was "real." When she saw the example of her mother's engagement, she became engaged. She particularly enjoyed watching me write comments on her mother's papers and then acting as messenger between us.

Not every student shared the essays with a parent. Some even put up an intellectual argument against their parents' involvement. Daniel, for example, gave feisty reasons for his parents' lack of participation. A longhaired transfer student from out of state, Daniel argued against Kahn's suggestion of making parents liable for their student's academic performance. Daniel wrote that "students must take responsibility for and take the consequences of their own actions." In a carefully reasoned essay, Daniel argued for abolishing grades and for establishing small, individualized study groups where students "graduate themselves as soon as they think they are ready to use their education in the outside world." In keeping with this line of thinking, he refused to take the editorial home, stating his education was his own responsibility, not his parents'. Nevertheless, he contributed positively to the discussion in his small group when other students described conversations with their parents.

The reluctance of some other students to share these essays with their parents was based more on family chemistry than on intellectual conviction. Jason asked me if he could stay after class because he wanted to tell me his mother's reaction to a particular article. He added that he hates asking his father's opinions because his father "always has too much to say." In fact, many students wrote that their parents talked too much or talked "at" them rather than "with" them. And not all parents were willing to contribute. Brian's mom said, "Go ask your neighbor." Cory's mom said, "Do your own work." However, my hope remained that if I encouraged an exchange of ideas at home, parents and students would learn to more often engage in "quality verbal interaction," a process that I believed could increase students' abilities to think critically and to articulate well-reasoned opinions.

Since something new and valuable seemed to be happening as a result of the "bridge building" in my two senior English classes, I decided to take another step: I would involve my ninety-one junior advanced placement composition students in an assignment of "quality verbal exchange." My assumption was that the parents of these students would be eager to talk about ideas with their bright, highly motivated children. I sent home the same kind of prompts that students would experience when they took the AP composition exam. One of these was the following aphorism from Henry David Thoreau:

> *"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after." In a well-thought-out essay, examine the accuracy of this aphorism in modern society. Concentrate on examples from your observations, reading, and experiences to develop your ideas.*

I asked students to talk about this statement with their parents and to write a non-graded narrative in class about their experience. Then, several days later, students would write a graded essay on this prompt. In this first attempt to send a "talk" assignment home with AP students, more students than I expected wrote that they did not share their prompts with their parents because their parents didn't speak English, were too busy, or (in the student's opinion) wouldn't be interested. Many others, based on their own narrative reports, did not have a positive experience, and some of their reflections were heartbreaking. Several parents did not understand the prompt or became critical of the student's response. The following two student narratives reveal very different outcomes:

> *I was very disappointed when I talked to my parents. They never went below the surface to see the true meaning. I did not benefit from the experience. As I became angry my parents became furious, and I got nowhere. They weren't willing to listen to my ideas. They still think I can't write even after I have shown them my improvements. The final results included a weak essay, upset parents, and a week indoors without privileges.*
> *—Charlotte*

> *At first I was reluctant to share the AP prompt with my mother who was home at the time I began my homework. This was because I assumed that she would not understand the prompt because English was not her first language. Yet when I interrupted her watching television to discuss Thoreau's quote with her, I was pleasantly surprised to see her turn off the blaring television and direct her full attention to me. I had never realized or even dreamed of how much attention she would give to me. We discussed the prompt and she at first didn't understand Thoreau, so I gave her my interpretation of it, and we built upon that. She talked about setting well thought out goals instead of working foolishly and impulsively toward it. It was a different, yet interesting experience to discuss my homework with my mother.—Joanne*

Joanne's comment that she had never "realized or even dreamed how much attention" her mother would give her made me realize that there was more going on in this interaction between parent and child than I had originally planned for. While my initial motivation had been to elicit parental support for their children's academic performance, I was beginning to see an unanticipated—and possibly more valuable—outcome. These discussions were building bridges not only between home and school but also within families.

For example, Stephanie writes:

> *I told my mother and step-dad that for homework I had to talk with them about two essay prompts from English. They said okay, but as the weekend went by they were busy and I was busy. Then yesterday I told them we had to talk about it. First my mother questioned why and isn't that my job to think of ideas on my own. So I read the prompt. At first my mom said she didn't know and that her brain hurt and that is the reason why she doesn't want to go back to school. But after awhile we started thinking and came up with some good ideas. My step-dad kept asking what an aphorism was, but he gave me ideas too. It was fun bonding with my parents. I don't get to do that at all, which makes me sad, but I got to show my parents how hard this class is and how I think. It was a priceless moment.*

Some students came away with a revised respect for their parents' intellectual ability.

> *I thought over the prompts with the help of my mother. She was an incredible help. I had no idea my mom was so smart.—Melinda*

> *To my shock, my mother responded with a thoughtful and reasonable answer... I turned to my father now, hoping to stump someone with this question... I could not believe my father even had a reasonable response to the prompt..."—Jason*

This new-found enthusiasm for parents' abilities was only slightly offset by a few students who reached an opposite conclusion.

> *In discussing the Thoreau quote with my parents, I came to a harsh realization. I realized that my parents would fail AP English.—Krisante*

In general, it was clear that many students were returning from these discussions with ideas for fresh ways to approach the prompt.

> *At first (my father) applied the quote to his occupational background. This confused me, but only because it made me think he misunderstood. I allowed him to continue though, and the more I listened the more sense he began to make. I felt bad for undermining him, which taught me a valuable lesson. —Casey*

> *That night at the dinner table I happened upon a break in conversation in which to introduce the question, and I did. My mother slowly finished chewing her food and followed it with a brief pause. She then made what I believed to be a wondrous and insightful interpretation in the context of various forms of literature and movies in popular culture. —James*

> *I shared my prompt on Thoreau with my grandmother. My parents happened to be very busy this weekend so I brought Thoreau up when I was talking to her. Thoreau was very interesting to my grandma; she had never read anything by him before but seemed intrigued. She is a very spiritual and religious woman and was very much in agreement with Thoreau and added her own religious tone to it as well. Talking to her helped me think of different ways of approaching this prompt.—Heidi*

Parents as well as students grew from a discussion of Thoreau's aphorism.

> *When I showed my dad I expected him to not get it. My dad is very bad in English, but extremely smart in the maths and sciences. He took a few minutes to read them and said, "Well I can't write on many things but this would be easy for me.' I just looked at him because I thought maybe he was being sarcastic (as he is a lot of the time) but he was very serious. He said he could do it because he has had many experiences with things that relate to the prompt. Now he wants to copy down the question so he can take it to work.—Jen*

I was concerned, however, about some of the students who, like Charlotte, had trouble approaching their parents and those whose

Call for manuscripts

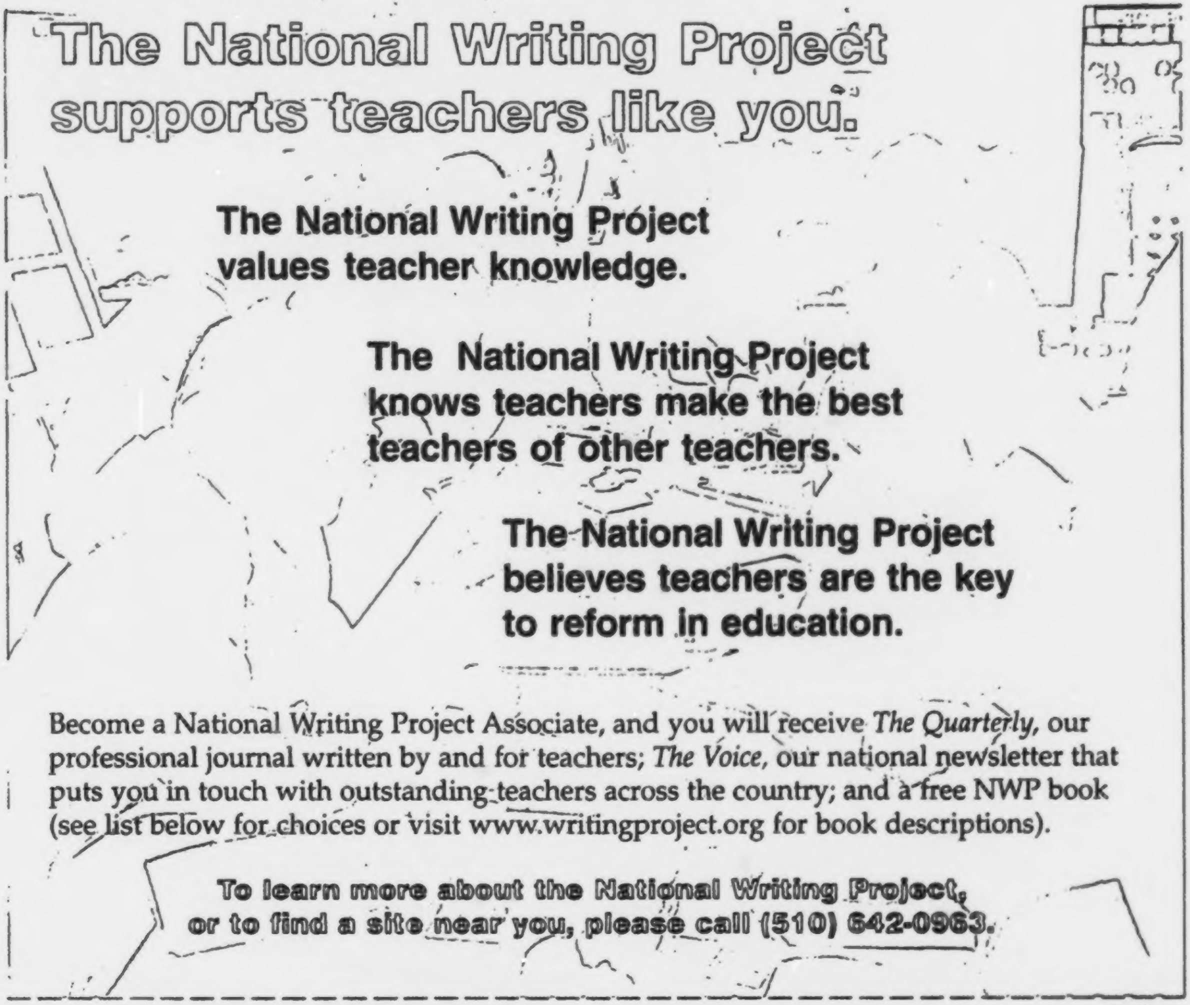
Writing About the Unfamiliar

For the winter issue of *The Quarterly*, we are looking for accounts of students writing about a world they are experiencing for the first time. Under the theme, "Writing About the Unfamiliar," we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to Yorkshire and the Lake District in England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature, the students' explorations peaked their senses and inspired their writing.

The adventures covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors. "Writing About the Unfamiliar" may grow out of a group visiting a college campus or a writer exploring a neighborhood that he or she hasn't visited before. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn what techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception of and reflection about new experiences.

The deadline for submissions to the winter issue of *The Quarterly* is November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org, or mail them to:

Editors, *The Quarterly*
National Writing Project
University of California
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042



The National Writing Project supports teachers like you.

The National Writing Project values teacher knowledge.

The National Writing Project knows teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.

The National Writing Project believes teachers are the key to reform in education.

Become a National Writing Project Associate, and you will receive *The Quarterly*, our professional journal written by and for teachers; *The Voice*, our national newsletter that puts you in touch with outstanding teachers across the country; and a free NWP book (see list below for choices or visit www.writingproject.org for book descriptions).

To learn more about the National Writing Project, or to find a site near you, please call (510) 642-0963.

QSU01

Yes, I want to support the National Writing Project!

I've enclosed my contribution. Please put me on your mailing list so that I can receive upcoming issues of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* and a free NWP book.

Here's how to reach me:

Name ______________________

Address ______________________

City/State/Zip ______________________

Phone ______________________

Email ______________________

Here's my contribution:

☐ $20 (1-year sponsor: 4 *Quarterlys*, 5 *Voices*, and a free book)

☐ $50 (3-year sponsor: 12 *Quarterlys*, 15 *Voices*, and a free book)

Local Writing Project ______________________

☐ Check ☐ VISA ☐ MC Account # ☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐

Exp. Date ____________ Signature ______________________

My free book: ☐Teachers at the Center ☐Teacher-Reasearchers at Work ☐Writer's Workout Book ☐I Can Write What's on My Mind ☐Poem for Every Student ☐Writing Your Heritage ☐Cityscapes

Please mail this form with your payment to:

National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Or fax this form with your credit card information to (510) 642-4545.

parents, for whatever different reasons, responded negatively. Kevin told his mother he needed help on something.

> *She asked what I needed help on, and when I told her that I needed her help on English, I saw the life drain from her. I explained that I needed to engage in "quality verbal interaction" on the Thoreau quote. At this moment she cringed and closed my door and walked away. About an hour later she came back and tried to help. My dad wouldn't even let me ask him for help.*

I came to realize that some parents were truly baffled by the concept of suddenly joining our classroom discussion. I saw that we needed practice in setting the stage for meaningful student/parent talk. So the next year I started "training" the parents in September at back-to-school night. I discussed my desire to extend the conversation of ideas from the classroom into the homes. Hearing it from me, parents were excited. They want to help their teenagers learn, and they know that the question "Have you done your homework?" does not go very deep, but parents often don't know what else to say or ask. Talking with parents, I explained some of Montano-Harmon's research about the value of "quality verbal interaction," about her view that students need more conversations with adults on an idea level as they develop language and critical skills. Despite a positive response, I was aware that not all parents attend back-to-school night. I also wrote a series of articles about reading and then talking about ideas in the home, that was published on the front page of our parent newsletter, *The Eagle Eye*. This newsletter is mailed home every six weeks with a graded progress report to the parents of all our students (3,200 students this year). I explained my idea of sending

Tips for Quality Verbal Interaction

1. Prepare parents if possible through parent newsletters, notes home, and back-to-school nights. Let parents know that the goal is "quality verbal interaction," not being "right" or being "wrong." These conversations about ideas may be only a few minutes at a time and still be effective.
2. Prepare students for a variety of parental responses. The goal is conversation about issues and ideas. Even if a parent doesn't want to talk at a particular time, it is worth the attempt.
3. Give a several-day window for "conversation"—even a week is not too much time, as parents and students both keep very busy schedules.
4. It does not matter what language parents and students use for quality verbal interaction. Conversation does not have to be in English to be effective.
5. Do not "grade" students on their parents' responses. Allow students to discuss their experiences in small groups and have students write a description, reflection, and/or analysis to the teacher.
6. Keep a sense of humor.
7. Praise students for making an attempt and reporting what happened.
8. Praise parents for responding.
9. Provide several opportunities for "take-home" conversations throughout the year.
10. Use prompts that encourage discussion of ideas and issues, not "right" or "wrong" answers.

prompts, editorials, or topics home for "talk," and summarized Montano-Harmon's research on "quality verbal interaction" and my desire to build a bridge between classroom ideas and talk in the home.

I took some additional steps to make this process more comfortable for parents and for students. First, I allowed more time—two weeks—for conversations between parents and students to take place. When students had not been able to talk with their parents, it was often because they had little time together. I wanted to take the pressure off.

I also prepared students for the possibility that they would not necessarily get a positive response. I assured my classes that their responsibility was to give a conversation a try. I let them know that they would not be graded down if for some reason parents were unable to talk with them.

At this point, parental response remains mixed. In some families it is understandably difficult to get a foot in the door.

> *Instead of an explanation I have received a tired look and explanation of tiredness. I persisted (in) my inquiry and was yet again received by glazed eyes and "I don't know, I'm too tired." I whined "but mom...' and again repeated my question and attempted to initiate a conversation. Once again to no avail. It's not a lack of communication or a dearth of family love, but my parents really were exhausted and intellectual conversation after their already mentally strenuous day would have been impossible.—Jason*

Other conversations took the student and the parent in directions neither I nor they would have guessed.

> *It could be that my mom has such a deep connection to Thoreau's quote that it has a painful meaning. She sounded like an Amy Tan Joy Luck Club mom. Indeed, she told me that she had not found what she was looking for in the U.S., and may choose to move back to Taiwan when I enter college. The quote from Thoreau is insightful in developing the idea about one's search for his or her role in society. Even a failed attempt to talk with my mom about Thoreau's meaning opened up a new perspective in my life as I try to find what my purpose is.—John*

However, since I have been providing more direction for parents and for students, there has been a general change for the better. Now that I allow a window of two weeks for conversations between parent and student and the "freewrites" that describe what happened, these narratives are much more extensive. Last year, not one of my ninety-one students wrote more than half a page. Last year's formal graded AP essays written in class on the Thoreau prompt were not particularly stronger than their essays had been on AP prompts they had not discussed with their parents. However, this year, when I asked students to explain to me in a freewrite what happened when they shared the Thoreau prompt with their parents, all students wrote at least a page, some two or more pages, and almost all described analytical discussions. I attribute the marked difference in the quality of shared discussion to my clearer explanation, to the students and parents, of what I was hoping for, as well as the two-week window that I accompanied with reminders of the upcoming deadline. Even students unable to connect with parents now seemed to have a lot to say.

Molly began:

> *Talking to my parents is one of the hardest things. We usually do not have a normal conversation without arguing. So, upon having to discuss this prompt with my parents, I was praying we were not going to break out in an argument about who was right.*

Her narrative continued for two and a half pages and included comments made by both parents and her commentary on their ideas. Although Molly saw herself as "suffering" through the discussion, she and her parents were holding a discussion at an idea level. As with other students, she narrated her parents' responses—even if negative—analyzing and synthesizing their ideas.

I continue to send ideas home for discussion. The results suggest that students do want to talk with their parents about ideas, are pleased when their parents will listen to their ideas, and are fascinated by the discoveries of family stories they have never heard before. In addition to building a valuable bridge between our classroom and their homes, idea-based discussion strengthens the bridge between parent and child.

CATHERINE HUMPHREY teaches English at Etiwanda High School in Southern California and is affiliated with the Inland Area Writing Project at the University of California, Riverside. She has a Ph.D. in English from The Claremont Graduate University and received National Board Certification in Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Enlish Language Arts.

A Voice That Is Heard

Living the Writing Project Philosophy as Coaches

SIDNIE MYRICK

Coaching involves everything from working with a teacher to create a literature-rich environment to diagnosing and developing reading lessons for individual students. The key to the project is the belief that coaches are no more and no less than a partner in this process.

Thanks for Friday. It was great to have you help me scoot things around. Listening and following my ramble also deserves big brownie points. It's wonderful to be able to talk to you because you can flip from my class to theory to my aspirations.

—Email message from a coachee

Creating a Coaching Philosophy

In the spring of 1999, in preparation for a large-scale coaching project sponsored jointly by the UCLA Writing Project and the Venice/Westchester Cluster of the Los Angeles Unified School District, I attended a coaching symposium in Oxnard, California. I worked with other educators, reading and discussing research on teacher learning and coaching. In her presentation, Beverly Showers, a consultant in staff development and teacher learning, shared the disappointing effects of most professional development workshops. She made it clear that for all the planning of participatory activities put into a presentation, the best one might expect is that 15 percent of the audience would transfer the information into classroom practice. In contrast, a coaching model where a coach and a teacher work as equals produces a marked change in teacher practice.

For years, I had been wondering whether the strategies I offered in after-school presentations were ever tried, but pleasant comments and positive evaluations made it easy to ignore the question. Recently, as thousands of emergency-credentialed teachers hired for class-size reduction began showing up in my audiences, it became obvious that workshops—after school, all day, even weeklong—were largely ineffective. After each workshop, I was mobbed by new teachers wanting to know just how to teach reading; whether or not students should copy an essay off the board; if second grade teachers should teach reading since that was done in first grade; or how to get students to sit down, begin writing, line up, like books. These were teachers who had no student teaching experience and no education course work, and yet they were full-time teachers, sometimes in their third year of teaching. They needed much more than another workshop.

The coaching model adopted for the UCLA-Venice/Westchester Collaborative Coaching Project was based on experiences with these teachers and the belief in collaborative learning. As Beverly Showers put it, "Coaching develops the shared language and set of common understandings necessary for the collegial study of new knowledge and skills." The coaching project mission statement put it this way:

> *The mission of the UCLA-Venice/Westchester Collaborative Coaching Project is to better student literacy outcomes through strengthening teacher practice. Teacher practice is strengthened through regular interaction between teacher and coach. Coaching is a partnership between two professionals working to solve the everyday and the complex*

problems of teaching. Coaching involves everything from working with a teacher to create a literature-rich environment to diagnosing and developing reading lessons for individual students. The key to the project is the belief that coaches are no more and no less than a partner in this process and always behave as such.

The work of other authors also helped shape how coaches in the project operated. Nolan and Hillkirk stress that "the coach's role was to facilitate, to listen, and to engage the teacher in an ongoing dialogue about the meaning and implications of his intentions and actions in the classroom." To realize this role meant being in the classroom with the teacher, acting as co-teachers or partner teachers.

The Voice That Is Heard

The coaching project unfolded. The partnerships and conversations began as I met a few of my soon-to-be coachees, including Laura, at a new-teacher workshop that we coaches presented for the district. Laura is a district intern, which means she has a bachelor's degree, has passed the state exam to prove minimum competency for teaching, works under an emergency credential, and receives training after school and on Saturdays throughout the school year. Laura, who took me up on an offer to help her set up her classroom, is typical of the teachers we loved working with as coaches: she is bright, enthusiastic, and as interested as we are in ideas. Teachers like Laura gave us solace when the chaos of coaching in a large urban district made helping teachers difficult.

Laura and I agreed to meet at her classroom the Saturday before school started. She had decorated the room with butcher paper trains ready to display her soon-to-be-second-graders' work. Fifteen boxes of children's books sat on the desktops. Her instinct to provide books and a library were good, but it would be difficult for her to act upon and sustain those instincts in the school in which she had been hired. My primary task with Laura would be to help her achieve success with her natural inclination toward a constructivist philosophy of teaching in a school that, with few exceptions, held to rigid transmission model practices.

Our first conversations took place around the physical arrangement of her room. After creating a class library with three bookshelves, a five-by-nine-foot carpet remnant bound around the edges with matching burnt orange electrical tape, and her books, sixty-three square feet of her space was gone. As we continued to arrange furniture to provide tables, cubbies made out of cardboard shoe organizers, and various learning centers, it became clear that there was no room for her teacher's desk. It was the first collision with the school culture.

"Do you need a desk?" I asked.

"Can I just get rid of it though?"

"When would you use it?"

"Planning."

"Okay, when would you be doing that?"

"After school, I guess."

"So, for the rest of the day, it would just be sitting there."

We discussed a couple of options—for example, replacing the construction/literature response center with the desk and letting students use the desktop during the day, covering part of the library rug, etc.—but decided to push the teacher desk into a corner so that Laura could think about it and decide later.

When I returned a week later, the desk was gone. She had quietly asked the custodian to remove the desk late one afternoon when most of the other teachers had gone home. Even though she liked the space, she was nervous about the decision. At her first intern meeting, she had received a list of regulations, one of which stated that the role book must be kept in the upper right-hand drawer of the teacher's desk at all times.

I explained that it was unlikely that anyone would ever check on this regulation, and we discussed how she could comply with the spirit of the rule. But something was still bothering her. It seemed that lunchtime conversation that week had focused on control. The consensus, as Laura understood it, was that control over students was developed through authority, and control over learning was accomplished with strict adherence to the basal. She felt herself drifting out of compliance with the role of teacher as her school defined it.

"Doesn't the desk say something about who is in charge?" Laura asked.

"Sure."

"It's my classroom, right?"

"Is that how you think of it?"

Laura didn't think so, but she continued with her argument calling for more teacher control. The students were leaving the library a mess, they were just painting every day at the construction/response-to-literature center, and they were writing about Pokémon™ every day in their journals.

The normal problems of teaching combined with a school culture that was different from the one she was creating had shaken her. As we talked, Laura saw that giving students more control would solve some of the classroom issues. She added library monitor to her classroom monitor list, she arranged the books in baskets so that students could better organize them, and she planned a time within her reading lessons for students to discuss what should be required at the construction/response to literature center. I confirmed that she was indeed doing things differently from most of the other teachers and that she was right to look critically at her own practice. I also asked her not to abandon something without first examining why she had adopted the practice in the first place, and without knowing whether or not the reasoning supported student learning.

Although unsure about the direction she was going, Laura agreed to move ahead with targeted small-group instruction with my help. We grouped her students by reading level as estimated from profiles the previous teacher provided. Together, we found several trade-fiction and non-fiction books for each group and built a universal theme for the first trimester around the titles we collected. We then planned for the next few weeks of reading. I was there the first two days Laura implemented this small-group rotation, helping students learn the traffic patterns, and helping Laura decide how to deal with the student work, pictures, beginnings of stories, and little books generated at the centers each day. As Laura continued with these plans over the next few weeks, she thought she saw progress in her students' ability to read and discuss the books they shared at small-group lessons. However, she lost sight of the progress every time a teacher at her school offered to share a worksheet or favorite lesson plan out of the basal. Laura would take the worksheets and advice and save them up for my visits. The worksheets lured Laura at the same time they terrified her. They seemed like such a surefire way to cover the skills, yet Laura worried that her students would struggle to correct the comma errors on the items or match definitions with the lists of holiday words. Laura assumed that if her students could not do well on these tasks, it was evidence that she had not taught her students these skills. We had many conversations such as the following.

"I gave this to my sharpest student to take home for fun. Look!"

This happened to be a Presidents' Day vocabulary worksheet. The student had matched five of the fifteen items correctly.

"Is this something you think they need to be able to do?" I asked.

"They have to know vocabulary."

"Do you think this worksheet will help them?"

"Maybe if I did it with them."

"Okay, then what?"

She shrugged. "Test them?"

I asked Laura how she learned new words. She admitted it was through reading, but she still had an inkling that her students' vocabulary was not growing enough to keep up with their peers at the school. I told her she might well be right. I still asked, "How do you know?"

Laura gave me a blank stare. This was a critical question for her and me. She needed a way to confirm her hunches about student growth. She also needed a way to analyze any growth assessment so that it would drive her instructional decisions and insulate her from the pressure to replace with skill sheets the reading and writing she and her students were doing. Additionally, as a coach, I could learn about Laura's students with her. I could provide another perspective on their present learning. Normally, a colleague can at best share information about where the students were the previous year.

I showed Laura how to administer an informal reading inventory (IRI), and we planned to teach together on my next visit, trading off leading the reading lessons and administering the IRI. Assessing students individually while sustaining instruction is a complex task for experienced teachers, much less a first-year, emergency-credentialed teacher. Not only are the logistics of individual assessment difficult, the implications of knowing directly what each student is able to do and ready to learn next are often overwhelming. Individual assessment results force a teacher to come to terms with the fact that students need different texts for reading instruction and that even students within reading levels may need coaching on very different aspects of reading and writing. Laura was not going to come out of this with a neat set of lesson plans for increasing vocabulary.

As the year rolled on, I sometimes wondered why a teacher like Laura considered operating in this way—even with the extra set of hands I provided. Had Laura attended one of my workshops on writing analytically in the primary grades, she may have learned how analytical writing follows analytical reading, seen some impressive student samples, and done some writing herself, but she would not have seen the structure, assessment practices, and instructional decision making it took to move my second-graders into analytical reading and writing. As a presenter, I would have held the same role her colleagues now held—that of an expert so removed from her day-to-day experience with her particular students that anything I offered would seem like handing her the decorator's plans when her house wasn't even built yet.

But, as a coach, I was in a position to build the house with Laura. I was in her classroom. We planned, cleaned, arranged, assessed, and taught together. We were building her program together, and this gave my advice the authority only a partnership does. So, when I suggested Laura look to the books she was reading with each group to identify promising vocabulary study words, this made sense to her. When I demonstrated a student vocabulary webbing strategy, Laura saw how that could fit into the structure of her lessons and modified the strategy so that students could use it when writing in their daily journals.

Working together every week over her first year, Laura and I through our coaching relationship had become a writing project of two. Laura's skill and confidence grew, and she switched from asking what she *should* do to asking what I thought about what she was *going* to do. In the spring, she developed a unit on relationships, adeptly collecting stories from the basal anthology that depicted different types of relationships. She added a letter-writing component that two of her second grade colleagues used. Laura had developed her own identity as a teacher and could share it with others.

Laura's analysis of her own practice grew as well. She began "seeing" the strategies we had worked on as she implemented them. She adjusted ReQuest (a reading comprehension strategy) to more actively engage students. She observed how a mini-lesson on descriptive language was showing up in her students' journal writing. As it came time for final grades and the prospect of retention for one of her students, Laura began to deeply study her own beliefs about education.

Coaching put two teachers in a room with a group of students on a regular basis. It provided Laura and I with a vehicle for working as teachers in this thoughtful way. In this intimate and immediate setting, Laura and I studied practice through student action and work. Most importantly, coaching allowed us to talk. Our conversations engendered deep reflection about the reason for teaching a lesson, the long-term goals of the instruction, and the nature of learning. Together, we negotiated the philosophical stance behind everything we did and ensured that the teaching was purposeful. We became the collegial partnership that Beverly Showers described, studying new knowledge and skills and ultimately becoming better teachers.

SIDNIE MYRICK has been a teacher for fifteen years and a fellow of the UCLA Writing Project for ten. She began her career teaching history at the high school level and moved to elementary for twelve years before becoming a coach. She is returning to the classroom to teach ninth grade English at Polytechnic High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

This article was originally part of a longer article co-authored by Kim Marantos.

Episodic Fiction

Another Way to Tell a Story

PEN CAMPBELL AND DAN HOLT

Separate episodes were like individual images juxtaposed to be woven together by the reader into a story. He found the form intriguing and, as writers are wont to do with intriguing forms, decided to try his hand at it to see where it would lead.

About fifteen years ago, Dan Holt read a story that changed the way he looked at fiction.

"Birds," by John O'Brien, was different from any story he'd read before. Unlike a movie or traditional short story, in which elements of the story line are connected by transitions to tell a story in a linear fashion, O'Brien's "Birds" seemed to Holt to be more like a slide show or even a music video. Separate episodes were like individual images juxtaposed to be woven together by the reader into a story. He found the form intriguing and, as writers are wont to do with intriguing forms, decided to try his hand at it to see where it would lead.

At the time, he had two different stories in progress, neither of which was working out: one about a man who, while visiting his parents in Arizona, struggles with the decision of whether or not to leave his wife, and a second story that grew out of a newspaper report about a man whose horse had broken its leg in the desert and subsequently been killed by coyotes. Experimenting with the episodic form, Holt combined these two stories into "Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You." In doing so, he took as a model for his own story one additional element from O'Brien's "Birds" beyond the episodic form itself—that of a repeated motif occurring in each episode.

"Birds" is not really a story about birds. Rather, it is a story about a man coming to a decision concerning himself and the sanctity of life around him. Each of the episodes of the story features a bird, not as a symbol, but more as a repeated motif—perhaps the way Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearance was featured in each of his movies. Holt used the repeated motif in "Ten Stories . . . ," which, despite its title, is not really about coyotes, though one appears in almost every episode.

Pleased with having solved the problem of the two balky stories, Holt sent "Ten Stories . . ." to Stuart Dybeck at Western Michigan University, who had suggested the O'Brien story to him in the first place. Having sent it with no more purpose than to say "Thanks—I enjoyed the story and fooled around with the form; here's what I got," Holt considered the matter closed. Several months later, however, when he received a copy of a magazine in the mail, there in the table of contents he found his name and "Ten Stories about Coyotes I Never Told You." Dybeck had sent the story on to his friend John O'Brien, who promptly published it in *The Great Lakes Review*, which he edited.

Since his introduction to episodic fiction, Holt has in turn introduced many others to the form: students in his high school creative writing classes, participants in both invitational summer institutes and advanced institutes at Western Michigan University's Third Coast Writing Project, and participants of the 2000 Festival of Writers sponsored by the Louisiana Writing Project State Network.

Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You

BY DAN HOLT

I. The White Fence

When our marriage broke up, I went home and painted the entire corral. I don't know why it was so important, but it was. I had to get home and grab a paintbrush and stand in the Arizona sun and paint the corral. I painted it white; so white you couldn't look at it for very long.

"Jesus, is that fence white," my father said.

"Whitest damn fence I ever saw," my mother said.

They stood, arm in arm, framed by a rose arbor. I wanted to cry, they looked so good. They looked so good standing there that I wanted to cry and maybe paint the fence again. After all, I had the time; another coat wouldn't hurt.

"That's true," my father said. "The chicken coop could stand a coat, too."

I heard a coyote yelp in the distance.

II. Morning Ride

There were partridges near the barn, and it was still cold enough that I could see my breath. I kneed Poco's belly so that I could tighten the cinch. He blew hot smoke and danced away from me.

The desert was green that December, and the earth was a rust color, especially with the red sun coming over Hat Mountain throwing a tint on everything. At the end of the graded road behind the barn were two wrecked cars. They were rust color, too.

I took my hands out of my pockets when the sun started to warm me up. I thought that it would be nice just to keep riding, deeper and deeper into the desert. I felt so good about the riding and the sun that I wanted to glide in a walking trot all the way to Mexico.

I caught, out of the corner of my eye, just a flash of gray.

III. Coyotes Are After My Mother's Chickens

I hung around the house, standing in the kitchen, watching Mom wash the dishes. She was talking to me.

"How's your job? Are you happy? Are you going back to her?"

I was sticking a butter knife into the toaster.

"You know that's plugged in."

"What?"

"You know that's plugged in."

"What's plugged in?"

"The toaster you're sticking the knife into."

She was looking out the window over the sink as she said that, and suddenly she stopped pulling glasses out of the suds and leaned forward to get a better look at something in the backyard. She was standing on her toes and then she said "Shit" and ran to the utility room, grabbing a .22 automatic out of the closet, and ran out the back door.

I followed her and saw her fire three shots at a disappearing coyote.

"I'll get one of them yet," she said.

"When did you start saying 'Shit'?" I asked her.

IV. Chasing an Old Coyote

I was twelve when we caught a coyote in the open, four of us chasing a coyote across a dried-out cotton field. He must have been old or sick because he couldn't outrun us. So we kept him in the middle of the field and then tried to run him over until he caught a hoof in the side. He stopped trying to run from us and just sat down in the middle of the field. We kept riding around him, Indians circling a wagon train, but he wouldn't run anymore. I guess he just decided it wasn't worth it.

V. Poco Throws Me

I was thinking "coyote" to myself when Poco jumped sideways. He was jumping and bucking. I pulled his head up and kept him from throwing me, but he kept jumping, first sideways and then he lunged forward, the bit in his teeth. The leather cut into my fingers.

"Shit."

Poco wheeled on his hind legs and reared.

"Son of a bitch."

We went down backward. I jumped to the side; he hit, rolled on his back like one large rocker off a chair.

VI. Cheating at Golf

My dad wanted me to play golf with him on Saturday. The golf course was the only place where he could talk. There was something about sitting on a bench in a lime green cardigan, waiting for two or three foursomes to get off the tee, that really opened him up. He told me the story about the time he and Ed from the shop tried to hit a coyote on the fourth fairway.

I broke 100 that day but cheated a lot. We both did. If there was a tree in the way, we'd move the ball, or kick it out of the rough, or sometimes put the ball on a little tuft of grass so we could hit a wood. Sometimes, we'd even forget a stroke. All in all, we cheated about the same.

"I don't know if I want to go back," I said to him while we were waiting to make our approach shots to the eighteenth green.

"What do you mean, you don't want to go back?"

VII. Screams

He broke his leg when he went down. He kept trying to get up and kept falling down again. His wild eyes looked so large and white. I ran down the riverbed, not wanting to look back at him thrashing in the sand. I didn't know horses could scream like that.

VIII. Go with God

The Mexicans came out of nowhere, out of the desert, just appeared in the driveway. One had a red rag around his head; the other had a hat pulled over his eyes, and they were both soaked from a shower. I found out later that there were others, whole families, hidden not far away.

continued on next page

Eight Rules About Episodic Fiction I Never Told You

1. The work involves a dynamic character, one who changes in fits and starts throughout the course of the story.
2. Episodes vary in length.
3. Episodes are roughly chronological, but not specifically so.
4. Episodes may or may not be multigenre, but the language is often rich and poetic.
5. A single unifying device runs throughout the story, appearing in each episode.
6. Episodes are not related directly by cause and effect; instead, all are related to a central theme.
7. If a traditional short story is a movie, moving in a linear fashion from beginning to end, an episodic story is more like a slide show or a music video.
8. And finally, to borrow a rule from George Orwell, "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

Following the Rules

First Holt wrote "Ten Stories . . ."; the rules came later when it was time to introduce episodic fiction to his students. In a way, teaching the rules is nothing more than articulating the process of how to take an interesting piece of literature and use it as a model—an effective technique writers have been using as long as there have been stories.

The protagonist/narrator of "Ten Stories . . ." is a man whose marriage has broken up, and his response has been to go home to his parents—and paint the corral. Throughout the story, we share his experiences—though not his thought processes—as he comes to a decision about his marriage. In the end, on his way home to resume his marriage, he views from the departing plane the corral he painted in episode one. At that point, most likely, the title clicks into place for the reader. The "you" in the title to whom the stories are addressed is his wife. These are stories he told her after he returned home.

None of the episodes are very long, and they vary in length from three lines of manuscript to perhaps a quarter of a page. The first three episodes are arranged in roughly chronological order, though one does not precipitate the next. They are not related by cause and effect. Actually, the order in which they are told could indicate simply the order in which they were recalled. The first three are memories about the protagonist's time away from his marriage. Episode four is a flashback to childhood, and the image of the four boys tormenting the old coyote ups the emotional ante of the story. Episodes five, seven, and nine together are the retelling of a single incident, fragmented by the insertion of episode six, "Cheating at Golf" and eight, "Go with God." The last episode follows the others chronologically and brings the reader full circle.

Each of the ten episodes is prose, rich with sensory images. All but episode seven, "Screams," and episode ten, "Chasing Chickens," contain a coyote—as promised by the story title. Seven is the shortest, most intense episode, and, on one hand, there's the least room here for the device of the coyote. Then, too, the missing coyote may heighten the tension of this climactic episode, causing us to glance over our reading shoulder for that "flash of gray." We don't see the coyote in "Chasing Chickens" either, and as the protagonist flies over the desert landscape, he imagines chickens running in circles—chased, we suspect, by the unseen coyote.

continued from previous page

My father saw them first and walked out to talk to them, his hands stuffed in his pockets. I could see him shake his head and then point across the desert to the west. Mom was holding the .22 and checking to see if it still had bullets. And just like that, they headed across the desert in the same direction my father had pointed, walking under the "Vayas con Dios" sign over the driveway entrance.

"Who are they?" I asked my father when he came back to the house.

"They call them Coyotes," he said. "They bring people to the promised land."

IX. Canis Latrans

I didn't see them until I was almost on them. They were standing like gray plaster statues, so still. I remember thinking that only wild animals can stand that still. I also remember thinking that if I could get close enough, I could see my reflection in their eyes. I picked up a rock and threw it at the largest coyote. He moved just enough so that the rock missed and then he froze again. We stood a little longer: one specimen Homo sapiens, sub species of the order Primate and approximately twenty specimen of Canis latrans facing one another in a dry riverbed in a desert.

Finally, they moved off toward the spot where Poco lay, exhausted.

X. Chasing Chickens

My parents stayed in the departure area until I was in the plane and the doors closed. I looked for our house and found it by looking for Hat Mountain and Winslow Peak, the red tile roof of the house drawing my attention. The empty corral didn't look white from the air. I imagined chickens running in circles in the backyard.

It's Not Funny Anymore

Andy Myers

In the fall, I used to rake the leaves with my grandpa in his backyard. We would go around the whole lawn raking them from underneath the trees, the bird feeders, and from behind the barn. We would also, very carefully, rake them out of the garden he grew so proudly, which was filled with parsley and rhubarb.

We would rake the leaves in rows across the lawn instead of piles. He always thought that method was the best. He kept me laughing the whole time we raked, telling me jokes that he had memorized from one of the many joke books he had on his shelves. He always told me the same one about the belly dancer, and I could never remember the punch line.

"Ginny, what's a four-letter word for Greek cheese?" My grandpa only asked for help on his crossword puzzles when he absolutely needed it. He did the crosswords out of the paper, and I would work right along beside him in my crossword puzzle book. He bought the book for me for my eighth birthday along with the *Book of 1,001 Jokes and Riddles. I* would usually finish my puzzles before him, but his were a lot harder.

On the playground at E. P. Clarke Elementary School, out by the Redwood Climber, I told my friends the joke about the four-legged canoe my grandpa had told me the weekend before. I didn't tell it as well as my grandpa did, but the guys still liked it and laughed all recess. After that day, I started telling them all of the jokes and stories that my grandpa had told me. All the ones I could remember that is.

Grandma had sent me downstairs to get the Christmas cookie cutters one Saturday morning before Christmas. Normally I hated to go down to the basement alone because my grandma ran a doll hospital and everywhere you looked there were broken dolls and dismantled doll parts laying around. I wasn't as scared as I usually was this time because I knew Grandpa was down there doing his genealogy studies. The other part of the basement was my grandpa's library. It was filled with tons of old books and newspapers, mostly stuff relating to our family or the Civil War.

I slowly made my way down the steep linoleum steps and into my grandpa's study. I peeked around the corner, hoping he would see me and fire off a joke or riddle, but he didn't. He was sitting behind his old green desk, reading a decayed yellow newspaper. His bifocals were slid halfway down his nose, and he was chewing on a fountain pen; I was shocked at the way he studied that paper. It was really the first time I had ever seen my grandpa not joking or without his usual fun-loving smile. He didn't seem quite the same.

We met my grandparents at church on a rainy Sunday morning in the early part of April. As my grandpa greeted me he said, "Hi-ya *Chester ol'top.* Glad to see you *back.* It's been *ears and ears,* but I still *nose* ya." As he said it, he touched every body part he mentioned on me. I laughed all through church and asked him to do it about a dozen more times that afternoon.

"Holy mackerel!" My grandpa exclaimed as I hit the wiffle ball over the fence with my big red bat. It was my first home run of the afternoon. It landed in the Burkel's backyard. There must have been a hundred wiffle balls we left in her backyard because my brother and I were always too scared to retrieve them.

My grandpa held my waist as I leaned over the fence to corral the ball. I grabbed it; and as he pulled me over, my shirt got caught on the fence. "Wait, Grandpa, I'm stuck," I said. He replied, "No, you're Myers; I'm stuck." My grandpa's last name was Stuck. I'll never forget how much we both laughed.

In the Upton Middle School cafeteria, I noticed I wasn't the one telling the jokes anymore. It was another boy who everyone thought was hilarious. He told one of the same jokes my grandpa told me. I hated him because of it, but I eventually got over it.

When we opened presents on Christmas Day at my grandparents' house, my grandpa always wore the Santa Claus hat. He would hand out each gift, and when we were without presents, he would re-supply us. That Christmas, my aunt thought it would be funny to wrap one of my presents in a Tampon box. Evidently the look on my face was the highlight of the day.

A couple of months after my grandpa's stroke, my mom visited him. She found a notebook with "Don's Notebook" printed really large on it. In the notebook were some basic characteristics to remember family members by: Andy = oldest, Josh = tallest, Karen = girl. I remember making fun of this notebook to my friends. That's the one joke I wish I could have taken back.

At the beach last summer, my girlfriend told me she liked me because I was always kidding around. She said I was quick witted. I told her I loved her that day. We were together about every single day after that.

A couple of months ago, I came home after being out with Lori around 12:30 a.m. The usual group of guys were over to spend the night. They were mad that I always went with her and never hung with them; I told them I would rather spend time with a pretty girl than sit around my basement making fun of each other. They all agreed with me, and we had a good time after that.

My grandpa was admitted to the hospital again in September. My mom, brother, sister, and I went to visit him one chilly morning after church. He didn't look very well. He was dressed in his white hospital shirt and propped in his bed. I noticed a sign that hung over his bed which read "Legally Blind." I guess it was there for the nurse's sake. I felt like crying as we left his room without even attempting any sort of joke or riddle to make him smile.

continued on next page

In some ways, perhaps the inclusion of the unifying device in episodic fiction is a little like rhyme in poetry—we have to be careful with it and be sure it isn't allowed to take over or muscle us into bad decisions, especially when we're just getting started. That's where the beauty and utility of rule eight comes in. As George Orwell says, "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

So is this a story about coyotes? Is the coyote a symbol, and if so, of what? These questions would undoubtedly come up in a classroom discussion of this story. Rule six says that all episodes should be linked by a common theme. In the first sentence, we have a man reacting to the turmoil in his marriage. We could look at the story as a process, with each episode contributing a piece to the process of the protagonist's decision. The episodes fit loosely together in this way, not always proceeding from each other, but clustering about the common theme of coming to know what we want to do in our own lives.

In the Classroom

One of the attractions of the episodic form is its versatility. While it came to Holt's attention first as fiction, it wasn't long before the form began suggesting itself for use in other types of writing as well. It is a natural for personal narrative, and students who have collected freewriting responses to prompts designed to encourage personal narrative are likely to find a rich collection of possibilities from which to develop an episodic piece.

The form is student friendly in other ways as well. The very nature of episodic writing breaks up the task of the whole piece into parts, encouraging students with their "do-ability." The often troublesome details of transitions and unity of time and place become more manageable when the story is told episodically. The structure of episodes also encourages students to think in terms of scenes in constructing their stories.

As we know, the move from personal narrative to fiction is a short step. Sometimes a student may begin a piece as personal narrative and, with later revisions, turn it into a piece of fiction. Holt points out that encouraging students to search for the roots of fiction within their own realities often yields realistic stories that touch the reader with their authenticity. Even personal narrative, when told episodically, is more likely to be driven by character development than by plot since the episodic story does not consist of a single cohesive chain of events.

An excellent example of such an episodic personal narrative is "It's Not Funny Anymore," written by Andy Myers while he was a student in Holt's creative writing class.

Following the Rules

"It's Not Funny Anymore" follows the rules. The protagonist is a dynamic character, maturing throughout the story. In the first six episodes, the protagonist is most likely between eight and ten, and these episodes have no specific chronology but serve to introduce the grandfather, his humor, and his importance in the boy's life. At the beginning of the seventh episode, the protagonist has become an adolescent, and his growing maturity in the following episodes corresponds inversely to his grandfather's growing frailty. Once the protagonist hits middle school, the episodes, which vary in length, are recognizably chronological.

Andy uses effective language throughout the prose episodes, creating clear and moving images. The episodes are formatted without the numerical labeling or titling of "Ten Stories . . . ." White space on the page separates one episode from the next. The unifying device of a joke or reference to one appears in each episode. While the unifying

continued from previous page

Christmas Day a few weeks ago, I saw my grandpa for the first time since I had been up to the hospital in September. I was too busy I always told myself, trying to make excuses for forgetting him. I tried to soak up as much about the day with him as I could because I was feeling absolutely awful for neglecting him. I sat in the living room with him as he tried to pet the dog, trying to carry on conversations.

He didn't wear the Santa Claus hat this year. Nor did he hand out a single present. He sat in his special chair with his cane draped over his knee, struggling to open his own presents, often times being the butt of a joke cracked by my aunt or uncle. Most of the time, everyone laughed except for me. I remembered when I used to laugh with my grandpa playing baseball, raking leaves, doing crosswords, and I was not about to start laughing at him.

I stopped over at my grandparents' house the other day to check on them. The three of us talked for over two hours. I could tell that it made their day that I came by. It made my day as well. As I left, I gave them each a hug and told them I loved them. As I grabbed my coat and headed for the door, I turned back and told my grandpa the joke about the belly dancer, the one he had always told me, hoping to get a laugh out of him. I did. He had forgotten the punch line.

Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother: An Episodic Short Story

KATIE IMACH

Sounds

What scared her the most in the muggy Haitian nights were the sounds—the eerie sounds of the night that bore into her brain and allowed no time for sleep. The sounds that echoed, night after night with their deafening rhythm. They came from so many different places, and yet all had the same story. The story that had been passed on for generations.

Children crying because of lack of food, their stomachs contracting to their full extent. An empty look in their eyes that shows so much agony in one glimpse. A stare that tells of their pain and anguish.

Children crying as they hold their bloody mother or brother in their arms and weep—begging the Lord to make their loved one come back. Such anguish experienced that they close off in their own cocoon, a cocoon of silence which they suffer in.

The sounds of soldiers, with their cocky commands beating down upon the people, the people they are supposed to be protecting, and the ever so frightening sound of gunfire, gunfire, gunfire.

Where are the sounds of laughter? Where have they disappeared to? She tries to remember that precious sound, but it is drowned out by all the others.

Letter to Daughter

Dear Faith,

I can feel that your prayers have been with me. As you have probably heard, the bombing has stopped! The tanks that had come into Port-Au-Prince two weeks ago finally left. Of course, the signs of their presence still remain.

Some buildings have been bombed, many houses have bullet holes in the windows, and wounded people walk the streets, but overall not that much damage has been done. It was a lot worse last month.

As usual, we don't know which party inflicted all this destruction. I don't understand how there can be so much chaos without any ramifications. Aristide tries his hardest, but it's hard to pacify our country. We are all so tired and feel that we can't trust anybody anymore. I want to believe he will make a difference, but I don't want to be disappointed once again.

Do you remember the little boy with big green eyes down the street? The one that was always after Maggie? Well, we attended his funeral today. He got his legs blown off by the terrorists and the hospital was very full, so by the time the doctor was available, he was already gone. His poor, poor mother. This is the second child of hers she lost. The other one she miscarried a few years ago. He was such a promising child—wanted to be a doctor, and would have made our whole community proud.

I'm so happy you finally got out. You have such a great future to look forward to in America. I would have left, but I feel I belong here. My blood is all Haitian, and it doesn't want to depart from its homeland. I don't want to abandon my people, especially at my age. I'd rather have a young one leave because at least they have a hope for a future. Me, I just live from day to day and pray that the Lord watches over our souls. Take care of yourself and know that your mama loves you. You are making us all so proud.

Love,
Mama

Story of My Life

I cried when my daughter was born
tears of sorrow
for the life I have brought her into
She doesn't deserve this
No one does

So alone
Sick of the same spiraling circle
of events
that affects every generation of my country
my women

My grandmother and mother
so strong
yet so ignorant to the fact
Things don't have to be this way

Poverty . . . virginity tests . . . abuse
rape . . . depression . . .
Political instability . . .
The story of my life

Scared of walking down the streets at night
and during the day
scared of my own country
punished for being a woman

So many responsibilities,
so little respect

"Tears from my eyes,
made me realize
all the pain inside"

Pain that I had swallowed for so long
a big lump in the throat
that grows and you ignore

I want to be strong
I don't let those tears shed freely
So tired of crying . . .
too tired to cry anymore

Journal Entry

It happened again last night. I woke up to the sound of gunfire and ran next door to Namphy's house, as I always do. I found his wife there, a small shadow curled in the corner, crying, sobbing, her whole body heaving with sorrow. "They took him away," she said. Namphy was taken prisoner by the soldiers. Why? Nobody knows, but he probably won't return. They never do.

continued on next page

device is more intrinsically a part of the story than Holt's coyote, the story is not about jokes. Each episode relates to the central theme of the protagonist's relationship with his grandfather and the inevitability of change that time brings to that relationship.

Researching Episodically

At Lake Michigan Catholic High School, students in Pen Campbell's senior English class spend the year exploring issues of social justice. Throughout the year, they read literature and view films in various genres, examining them through discussion and writing. In late January, students choose a research question to investigate in-depth over the next three months. At the end of the year, they present a portfolio of work that includes a visual piece, a traditional research paper, and either a multigenre collection or a piece of episodic fiction, all of which grows from their research.

As they read, discuss, and study various forms, they respond to prompts designed to help them create characters through which they can voice what they are learning about their research topics. Sometimes, the prompt is a piece of literature students use as a model. Sometimes, Campbell offers prompts that have successfully generated personal writing. Students put themselves in the place of someone affected by the topic they are researching, and through those eyes, in that voice, they respond to the prompt. Writing letters or journal entries in the voice of a character often yields excellent material for the students. After collecting a number of these responses in their daybooks, students have a body of drafts from which to choose pieces for further development.

"Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother: An Episodic Short Story" grew out of Campbell's student Katie Imach's research on conditions in Haiti. After reading the work of novelist Edwidge Danticat early in the school year, she became especially interested in questions of a woman's life in Haiti. Katie has taken the episodic fiction form in a slightly new direction by using a variety of narrative forms to create her story.

Following the Rules

"Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother" is a multigenre episodic story. In the first episode, prose rich with images, the protagonist is introduced in third person. In the next, we hear her voice as she writes a letter to her daughter, and in the third episode, we delve deeper into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings about her life through a poem. The short journal entry of the fourth episode, with its matter-of-fact acceptance, develops our sense of the dreadful realities under which the protagonist lives her life. The final episode combines the third person prose of the first with the protagonist's voice in a poem that ends in prayer.

These episodes may be chronological, though the theme of story around which all the episodes cluster speaks of an endurance that negates the importance of which event came first. In the same way, the change in the protagonist, which we would expect, becomes secondary to the fact that she endures. Her dynamism is grounded in that endurance, rather than in an overt change or epiphany.

The unifying device in this story is more subtle than in "Ten Stories . . ." or "It's Not Funny Anymore." In each episode, a sound of sorrow or of trouble reiterates the theme of the story. As readers, we may not be conscious of these sounds in the same way we become conscious of the coyote or of the jokes in the two earlier stories. Imach's use of sound is an effective use of sensory images, but if the repeated motif blends so smoothly into the story that it isn't noticeable, does it still have a purpose? Perhaps the question it brings is really about the purpose of the coyote, the jokes, and the

continued from previous page

Wonder

This warm and starry night is eerily silent as she ponders her life and this war, which has never ceased to control and limit her. She has never known peace and wonders what life would have been like under different circumstances.

I wonder what it's like to go to sleep,
knowing you'll soon see the light
of a tranquil dawn

I wonder what it's like to let your children play
outside,
careless and free,
without worrying you'll never see them again

I wonder what it's like
not to hear the splatter of bullets every day
echoing through the alleys

I wonder if this will end
this insanity
That's all I pray for

sounds. Sometimes, the repeated motif serves more as a cattle prod to the writer than as a beacon to the reader. The challenge becomes fitting the coyote in; rising to that challenge, we tax our writing brains, which is always good exercise for us.

Rule seven says if a traditional short story is a movie, moving in a linear fashion from beginning to end, an episodic story is more like a slide show or a music video. "Through the Eyes of a Haitian Mother" does have that episodic, music video feel, and it also has a feeling of authenticity that is present despite the fact that this is not the personal narrative of the writer. The student author is not a Haitian mother, but in taking her research and seeking to see that research as reality through the eyes of a character, she has clearly demonstrated her new knowledge of her topic. And isn't that, after all, why we research—to understand something we didn't understand before?

In the End, It's Still Storytelling

Getting started on episodic fiction is a little like being pregnant. Suddenly, you look around, and, where you never thought a thing of it before, you begin to see pregnant women and babies everywhere. The same thing happens with episodic fiction. As a matter of fact, a number of people have pointed out the similarities between the episodic form and so much of the nonlinear communication that is becoming more and more prevalent in our digital age. Internet sites, magazines, and even textbooks present a mosaic of information on each page, encouraging a randomness of order through which students move with increasing adeptness. *B* no longer necessarily follows *A* as a matter of course, and episodic fiction reflects that change nicely. But, in the end, no matter how you get started with episodic fiction, and no matter how you play with it or what new twists and turns you give it, it all boils down to another form of storytelling. And ultimately, that's what matters—telling the story. How you tell it—how you get there—is not as important as the fact that you're telling it. But, as getting there *is* half the fun, episodic fiction is an incredibly flexible, creative form—and one you and your students will certainly want to try.

Note

While they may not all offer examples that follow our eight rules exactly, the books below may be useful in beginning to think episodically.

Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres, by Tom Romano (Boynton/Cook, 1995). Filled with ideas and examples, this is a book that encourages an entirely new approach to research writing for many of us.

Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age, by Eliza T. Dresang (H. W. Wilson, 1999). *http://slis-two.lis.fsu.edu/~inst/RC2.htm*> Check out Dresang's Web site and be sure to take a look at the Book Updates and the archived updates for excellent reading recommendations.

The Good Times Are Killing Me, by Lynda Barry (Sasquatch Books, 1999). A blend of coming-of-age social commentary and a fantastic multigenre research example in "The Music Notebook" section, this book is a gem. It would make a nice pairing with another coming-of-age episodic, *House on Mango Street* (Vintage Books, 1991), which is also available as an audio book read by author Sandra Cisneros.

In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal, edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones (W. W. Norton and Company, 1999). This is a marvelous book to use for models of short personal narrative essays.

Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories, edited and introduced by Jerome Stern (W. W. Norton and Company, 1996). Another interesting form especially useful in episodic writing is micro or flash fiction. Pieces done in this form are very, very short stories of approximately 250 words and are, in a way, a hybrid of fiction and prose poetry. The book includes excellent examples.

Soda Jerk, by Cynthia Rylant (publisher unknown, 1990). A wonderful little book, an episodic story in poetry of a young man's adolescence in a small town.

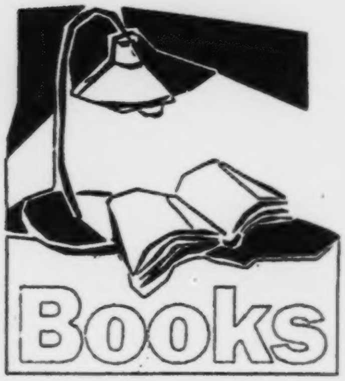
Frenchtown Summer, by Robert Cormier (Delacorte Press, 1999). Cormier's own memoir in verse.

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy, by Sonya Sones (HarperCollins, 1999). A young girl's telling of the title situation in verse.

Out of the Dust, by Karen Hesse (Scholastic, 1999). A young girl's struggles during the Dust Bowl, told episodically in verse.

Dan Holt, a co-director of the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University and a former Michigan Writing Teacher of the Year, teaches creative writing at St. Joseph High School, in St. Joseph, Michigan, where he is also the advisor for the newspaper and literary magazine.

Pen Campbell teaches ninth and twelfth grade English, speech, and drama at Lake Michigan Catholic High School in St. Joseph, Michigan, and is a teacher-consultant with the Third Coast Writing Project.



Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking

By Laura Robb

REVIEWED BY SUZANNE CHERRY

A Composition of Consciousness: Roads of Reflection from Friere to Elbow

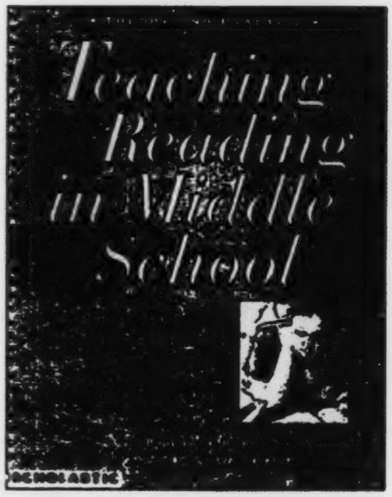
by Patricia H. Perry

REVIEWED BY MONIE HAYES

Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking

By Laura Robb. Scholastic Professional Books, 2000. $19.16; 352 pages. ISBN: 0590685600.

I admit that I picked up Laura Robb's book, *Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking,* with some reluctance. I'm not a middle school teacher. But as my students are working in middle school classrooms and we seem to have a number of middle school teachers working with us at our writing project site, I thought it was time to delve, again, into the mysteries of middle school. And, with the statewide emphasis on reading, it was also time to renew the connection between reading and writing. I'd worked with reading before, but that was when I was in graduate school. As a writing teacher, I cannot escape reading; I study reading to find ways to enhance my students' writing.



So, I plunged into Robb's book and was immediately enchanted. Her introduction unabashedly argues that middle school is the perfect teaching level—"a time of significant academic, emotional, and social growth" (8). She argues that excellent middle school teaching requires actively involved students and topics relevant to the students' lives. Before I'd finished with the introduction, I was agreeing, adding a single caveat— that whether you're teaching at the elementary, middle school, or high school level, good teaching always involves students actively and is always relevant. Despite the caveat, because Robb began her book with what I believed, I immediately decided this book wasn't going to be as much of a chore as I'd anticipated.

The more I read of *Teaching Reading in Middle School,* the more I realized how much Robb's thinking meshes with National Writing Project (NWP) philosophies and approaches to teaching, with which I, as director of a writing project site, am very familiar. Robb believes a productive reading program "considers and makes use of research in these areas: 1) strategic reading; 2) motivation and involvement; 3) a workshop environment" (13). Strategic reading, I learned, requires discovering students' reading processes, modeling strategies, and helping students to internalize these strategies. Teachers teaching teachers, the tagline of NWP, is modeling. Our demonstration lessons are modeling activities. We use workshops all summer long, in continuity meetings, and in various activities not connected with the summer institute. And, beyond that, our teacher-consultants promote workshops—not because of any one theory, but because when they're done right, workshops help improve writing. As close as Robb's ideas are to NWP beliefs and activities, I wouldn't be a bit surprised to learn she is a teacher-consultant with a writing project. I hope she is.

Robb puts forth nine key reading strategies: activate prior knowledge; decide what's important in a text; synthesize information; draw inferences during and after reading; self-monitor comprehension; repair faulty comprehension; ask questions; build vocabulary; and develop fluency. With few adjustments, these could be nine key strategies for writers as well. Robb's book reminds me of the need for writing teachers to understand the strategies for helping students improve in reading. Reading and writing are inextricably intertwined.

Robb's eleven chapters help teachers with researching; organizing reading workshops; understanding strategic reading; discovering what students know about reading; preparing strategy lessons to help students learn to read; modeling; connecting books and students; organizing strategic reading groups; cross-grading projects; and assessing, interpreting, and evaluating. Each chapter includes solid research that's well documented and well explained. Call-out boxes highlight the applications of research in everyday classrooms. Chapters are peppered with samples from Robb's classroom, sample handouts, schedules, lesson plans, lists of ideas, lists of strategies, guidelines, and hints. At the end of each chapter, Robb challenges readers to pause and reflect about their own reading programs and the issues she's just raised.

Teaching Reading in Middle School is an easy-to-read, solidly grounded book, and—most importantly—it is practical for classroom teachers. All of Robb's handouts and materials are provided in five appendices for the classroom teacher to reproduce. It's a book I envision teachers pulling from the shelf and using over and over again. The downside, if there is one to this book, is that Robb doesn't give as much emphasis to writing as I'd like to see. Okay, I'm a writing project director, and I love writing as much as Robb loves reading; I'm prejudiced about it. Still, I'd like to see her put more emphasis on the writing component of her reading-writing workshop. To be fair, Robb does have students writing a good bit—they write "all about me" letters, fast writes, literature response journals, observation notes, story-specific questions, "what's hard?/what's easy?" reflections, debriefings, and even minilessons. It's clear to me that she integrates reading and writing. What isn't clear is how Robb would go about helping other teachers integrate the two subjects.

Robb's book is one I've ordered for our summer institute library; I'm going to encourage our middle school fellows to try it out, and I'm going to use pieces of it in various activities this summer. I'm also going to use it with my preservice teachers. They need to hear this voice of experience and practicality as they prepare to teach.

I strongly recommend this book because of its practical applications of theory but also because of the thoughts and questions it raises, not all of them new by any means. For example, if students aren't reading at grade level, they can't be writing at grade level. It seems to me that we have to adjust our teaching and our assessment of writers to account for their reading levels. I'm reminded, too, that writing across the curriculum must be accompanied by reading across the curriculum. This is as true for kindergarten as it is for the university. Finally, I'm left with a question I'd like to explore this summer—is it possible to make the reading-writing connection more explicit to students? To teachers? To parents?

So, put aside any reluctance you might have about plunging, once more, into reading or any hesitation you might have about middle school students and read Robb's book. You'll be refreshed, recharged, and ready to renew your own journey toward becoming an interactive teacher.

Suzanne Cherry is a professor of English/education at Francis Marion University and is also the director of the Swamp Fox Writing Project, both of which are located in Florence, South Carolina.

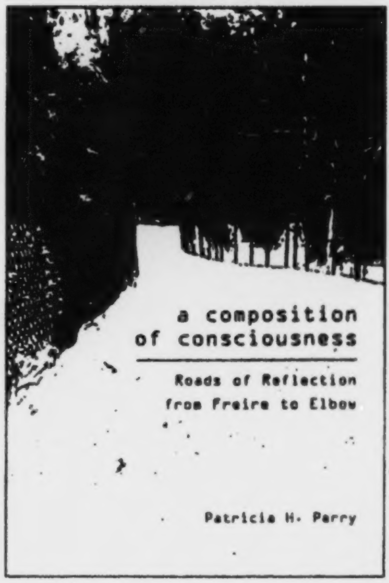
A Composition of Consciousness: Roads of Reflection from Freire to Elbow

By Patricia H. Perry. Peter Lang Publishing, 2000. $29.95; 221 pages. ISBN 0-8204-4167-8

In *A Composition of Consciousness: Roads of Reflection from Freire to Elbow,* Patricia H. Perry offers some sound, or even revelatory, advice for professors of composition. Her proposed way of understanding the writing process as deliberately metacognitive and dialogic can be fruitful for secondary school teachers of writing, though the rhetorical angle of Perry's tract is intended to more broadly and philosophically take up—and take on—trends and attitudes prevalent in the academy, in the freshman composition classrooms located there, and in the field of literacy instruction.

Perry explains the influence that Paulo Freire's work has had on her philosophy and practice as a composition teacher. She contends that the most important work teachers and students can enact is performed at the site of students' consciousness. It echoes Freire's work among—and with—Brazilian peasants toward the realization of transitive and perhaps critical consciousness, explaining Freirean concepts as she traces their relevance to her proposed methodology. Perry exhorts using dialogue to encourage students to become metacognitive composers and citizens. Because it is through consciousness that we experience, interpret, and elect how to act in the world, Perry contends that any pedagogy that overlooks consciousness cannot have true personal or political significance for our students.

While Perry advocates a dialogic method for guiding students to develop their awareness of their own conscious experience of writing processes and topics, because of her goal, her teaching is fundamentally student centered. Thus, she draws upon Peter Elbow's work as well as Freire's in arriving at a "composition of consciousness." Perry takes on criticism of Elbow's expressivist practice as apolitical or, worse, elitist, in order to reclaim his theory and approach as dialogic. In particular, Perry finds that a full reading of Elbow's "believing game" and "cooking"—letting the ingredients of a composition communicate with and flavor one another—encompasses an author's apprehension of his or her work in the context of an audience. Elbow's praxis extends beyond the author and the text and is a potentially political enterprise through the dialogism inherent in the writing process and the metacognition and reflection that dialogue, both internal and external, demands.



a composition
of consciousness

Roads of Reflection
from Freire to Elbow

Patricia H. Perry

To learn to write, Perry contends, students must write to learn. She proposes that writing instruction ought to center on creating knowledge *about* writing. Perry suggests that we have not given process writing our full ideological and institutional support. "We need to stop and think long and hard," she argues further, "before taking steps down the post process path" (208). Her proposal that we work with our students toward achieving a composition of consciousness is a call for a recommitment to the theoretical underpinnings that built and braced the process writing movement. Perry locates consciousness as not only the site of but the basis for knowledge making.

Specifically, as she calls for an approach to writing instruction based upon dialogue and reflection, Perry sets out not only to reestablish Freire and to rehabilitate—or redefine— Elbow, but to challenge three regnant approaches to writing pedagogy: positivism, critical pedagogy, and social construction (strange bedfellows, those, as Perry acknowledges). Perry first acknowledges and describes the extensive and unsettled debate over the nature of consciousness, explaining that, for her purposes as a writing teacher, it is the "target and tool for creating knowledge about writing" (11). She claims that positivist approaches, such as those advanced by E.D. Hirsch, wrongly and simplistically cast writing as a mechanized skill and consider instruction as one size fits all. Perry notes, as many educators have, that this viewpoint is not only reductive but reactionary in that it ignores the inequities such an approach serves to perpetuate, as well as overlooks the Freirean concept recognizing the learner as present in the construction of meaning.

That said, Perry goes on to stress the limits of critical pedagogy and the social constructionist approach. Her composition of—and in and through—consciousness sees learners as individuals with unique experiences, outlooks, and needs. Perry claims that any approach that addresses them as merely constituted by sociocultural institutions and positions will fail to tap their rich inner lives and to engage them with the writing process. She further cautions that in critical and social constructionist approaches to literacy instruction, the literacy component can get short shrift. That is, the topic of research and description can become privileged, over-reflective attention to oneself as a writer. While Perry's call that we avoid this is aptly heeded, she sets up a false dilemma: though a focus on the research and writing topic can dominate the composition-class experience at the expense of exploration of the research and writing processes, it needn't. Given time, we can guide our students to consider both. Indeed, their contemplation of the former can inform their manipulation of the latter, and Perry's call to critical consciousness can be turned upon the issues students take up in their research.

Ultimately, Perry wants students to depart the composition classroom with a cognitive repertoire for thinking about writing and to be present in their continuing construction of knowledge. Perry's goal is important, and where realized, should yield rich rewards for our students. But her philosophy already informs practice where freshman composition is taught at my institution (the University of Iowa), as well as in its program for preparing literacy instructors. So while the author's hoped-for world is worth striving to attain, her view of current circumstances is perhaps too grim. Moreover, most of the freshmen who enter the composition course that I teach expect to learn about writing. These students are, however, often uncertain what such learning will look like, especially the students in the "average" sections. Perry's call for students to reflect upon their process, indeed to be held accountable for doing so, is worth heeding. The strategies and ways of thinking about writing that she exhorts we help our students internalize are worth cultivating, again as a joint, dialogic enterprise. She is wise to note that this is a time-consuming project—not only in terms of intensive sessions but also in terms of extended practice over time—and to suggest that our institutional systems for providing writing instruction need to account for this in terms of class size and course length.

Reading Perry's book and mulling my own response to her writing and ideas brought to mind the question of audience. Perhaps more of her colleagues agree with Perry than she knows. But, then, part of her mission in writing this book is to suggest that perhaps Freire's work is more foundational and Elbow's is more in line with their thinking than her colleagues are aware. Whether or not accepting Perry's argument will lead us to change or merely affirm our views, her linking of theory to practice is worth tracing.

Monie Hayes is a Ph.D. student of language, literacy, and culture at the University of Iowa, where she teaches an undergraduate course in composition and speech.

Coming this fall from NWP books

The Whole Story
Teachers Talk About Portfolios

EDITED BY MARY ANN SMITH AND JANE JUSKA

A collection of essays by teachers about
using writing portfolios successfully in the classroom

Also available from NWP books

Teachers at the Center

A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project

BY JAMES GRAY

Gray captures the excitement behind the early evolution of the writing project model—a model that has changed the face of American education.

$12.50, 148 pages

Teacher-Researchers at Work

BY MARION S. MACLEAN AND MARIAN M. MOHR

A thoughtful, friendly, step-by-step guide to classroom research. Drawing from their own experience, as well as that of 48 other teacher-researchers, the authors offer solid insights into the research process.

$15.00, 290 pages

Order by phone at (510) 642-0963, or use the online order form at www.writingproject.org for extra savings!

Submission Guidelines

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and the teaching of writing, as well as engaging reports by writing teachers on the research they conduct in their classrooms. Articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by teachers or researchers that address the following themes:

- balancing process and product in the classroom
- exploring connections between writing and reading
- grounding student writing in community
- evaluating how a teacher's personal writing practice relates to the teaching of writing
- examining the impact of educational standards on writing education.

If you have an idea for an article addressing one of these themes, or an idea for an article of general interest to writing teachers and researchers, give us a call at (510) 642-0976; send a query letter, draft, or completed manuscript to: *The Quarterly,* National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042; or email us at *editors@writingproject.org.* For complete writer's guidelines, please visit our Web site at *www.writingproject.org*, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the above address.

NWP

The Quarterly is a publication of the National Writing Project.

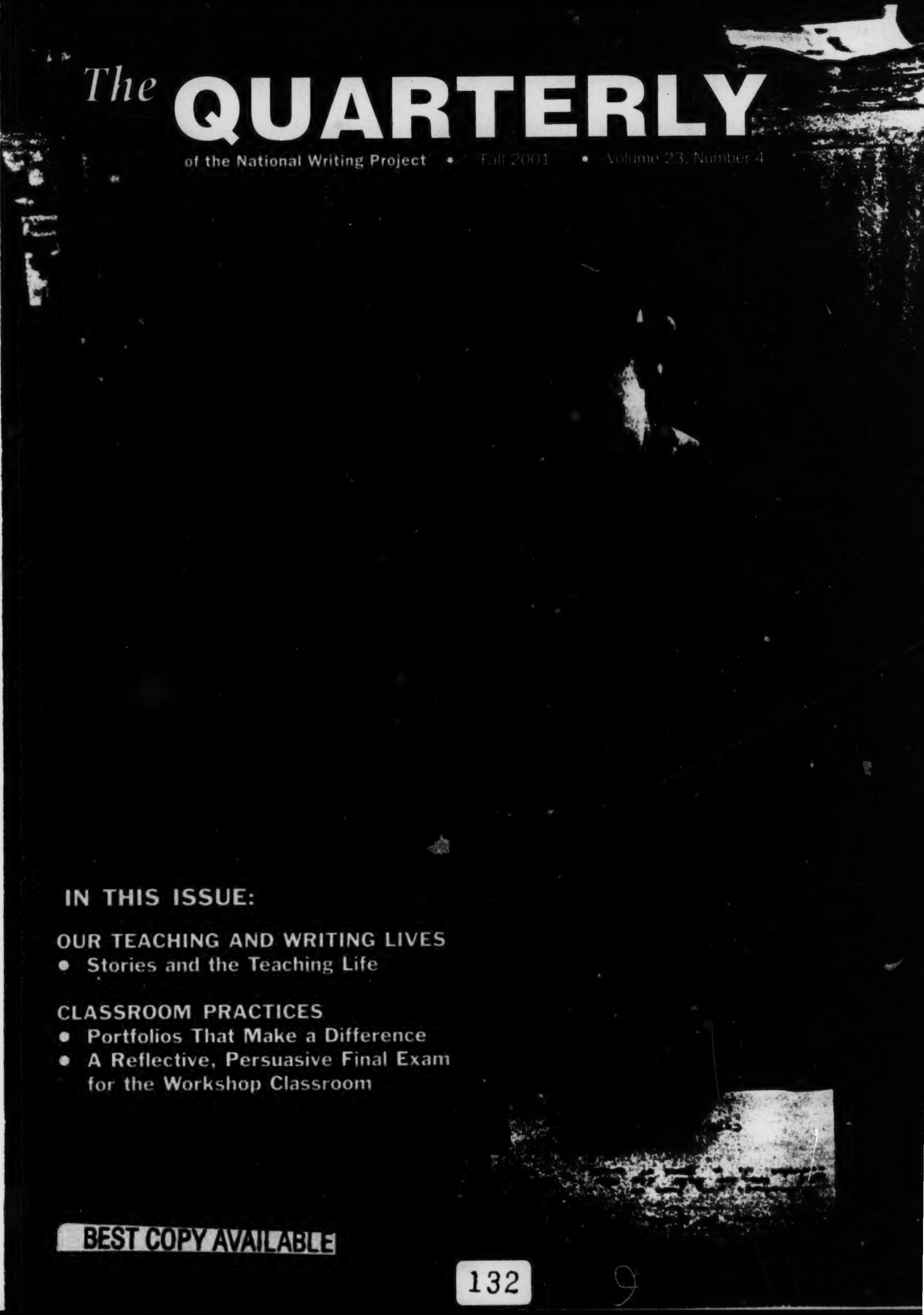
EDITORS:	Amy Bauman Art Peterson	EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:	Richard Sterling
		CODIRECTORS:	Judy Buchanan Elyse Eidman-Aadahl Mary Ann Smith
DESIGN AND LAYOUT:	Rebekah Truemper		
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR:	Roxanne Barber		
		FINANCE DIRECTOR:	Michel Mathis

Support for this publication is provided to the National Writing Project from the U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

ISSN 08963592

University of California
National Writing Project
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
University of California



The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Fall 2001 • Volume 23, Number 4

IN THIS ISSUE:

OUR TEACHING AND WRITING LIVES
- Stories and the Teaching Life

CLASSROOM PRACTICES
- Portfolios That Make a Difference
- A Reflective, Persuasive Final Exam for the Workshop Classroom

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

9

The QUARTERLY

of the National Writing Project • Fall 2001 • Volume 23, Number 4

OUR TEACHING AND WRITING LIVES

Stories and the Teaching Life 2
TIM GILLESPIE

Teaching Mining; Mining Teaching 7
PEGGY RILEY

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Matching Reading Models and Strategies 12
MARY FRANCES LANDENWICH

Portfolios That Make a Difference
A Four-Year Journey 17
JUDITH RUHANA

A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop 25
ERIN (PIRNOT) CICCONE

Beyond Rhetoric
A Reflective, Persuasive Final Exam for the Workshop Classroom 28
SARAH LORENZ

How to Build Better Engineers
A Practical Approach to the Mechanics of Text 32
RON E. SMELSER

BOOKS

Updrafts
Case Studies in Teacher Renewal 36
EDITED BY ROY F. FOX
REVIEWED BY MICHELE PITTARD

Beyond the Writers' Workshop
New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction 38
WRITTEN BY CAROL BLY
REVIEWED BY MICHEAL THOMPSON

Cover photo by Elizabeth Crews.

Stories and the Teaching Life

TIM GILLESPIE

"In my teaching notebook . . . I can mull over the day's challenges, savor small victories, tinker with problems, initiate small disturbances of thought, and gain a bit of perspective on the daily triumphs and despairs of teaching."

During my teacher-training internship many years ago, I was assigned to do some small bit of what was then called "systematic self-observation" and what today we might label "teacher research." I dutifully kept a notebook on a couple of activities I was trying and mulled over—in writing—why they soared or flopped. Then I finished the educational course I needed to get my high school certificate, started teaching, and forgot most of whatever I'd learned.

However, one thing that did last, through some alchemy of time and necessity, was the routine of keeping a notebook in which I'd regularly write about my teaching. The *assignment* to do teacher research became a *habit*. And this ongoing habit of reflection, I think, has been one of the factors that has kept me teaching—and generally happily so—for twenty-nine years.

Many nights—or at least those few nights when I don't have papers to read, lessons to plan, civic duties to discharge, or fatherly pleasures to engage in—I'm writing about my teaching in what I still call my teaching notebook. With the evening's distance and the quiet plink of the keyboard, I can mull over the day's challenges, savor small victories, tinker with problems, initiate small disturbances of thought, and gain a bit of perspective on the daily triumphs and despairs of teaching. The classroom is the site of my public account as a teacher; the notebook is the site for my personal account, a refuge for articulating and revising my teaching life.

Over the years, this personal narrative of my teaching career has become increasingly important to me, and I've become more committed to sharing my musings with fellow teachers, mostly in the hope of hearing good classroom tales and lore in return. We teachers need to tell our stories, because true classroom narratives offer an important alternative to other prevalent modes of discourse about school life. There are competing narratives out there about this profession of ours that are dangerous, and our classroom stories resist and complicate them. Let me mention three of those narratives about teaching that worry me. For lack of better words, I'll call one the narrative of abstraction, one the narrative of heroism, and one the narrative of complaint.

The Narrative of Abstraction

The *narrative of abstraction* is my shorthand for much of the public discourse about schools that takes place on the editorial pages, the talk-radio airwaves, the TV news, and in the voters' pamphlet, all using the language of policies, standards, fiscal constraints, reforms, performance testing, and so forth. These public conversations are too often abstract and remote from the actual primary site of education, the classroom. Such abstractions are easily ignored or neglected. Every educational issue should have real children's names and faces attached to it; otherwise, damage may be done to those children. Our classroom stories offer those names and faces.

Let me offer an entry from my notebook from two years ago about one of my students—a senior at the time—whom I'll call Mickey. Way back when Mickey was in second grade, he got hit by a car and sustained a massive head injury that put him in a coma for two-and-a-half months. Luckily, he lived, but this traumatic brain injury, or TBI, causes him to suffer from the permanent condition of *ataxia*, which means he has had trouble ever since he was seven controlling his muscles and body movements, even his vocal cords. He walks with a herky-jerky gait and talks in a slow vibrato and shakes so much he can't write (though he can compose with laborious slowness on a special keyboard he has at home). He's also very bright. For many years, the school district has hired a special assistant who accompanies him to class to help him with any written work. Here is a passage from my notebook about Mickey:

> ***October 1999***
>
> *It's Homecoming Week. Every day the students are invited to dress a different way to cultivate "school spirit." Monday is Wear School Colors Day, Tuesday is Twins Day, and this day is Grunge Day or Raggedy Bum Day or something like that; I confess I don't always pay close enough attention to this stuff. In any case, we're working with the novel* Siddhartha *in first period. During our book chat, I notice Mickey pulling awkwardly at a tear in the knee of his jeans. It looks like he's trying to make the tear larger. Toward the end of the period, Lynn (Mickey's educational assistant) has to leave. While the students are reading silently, I amble over to him; he is still ripping at the hole in his pants leg.*
>
> *"What are you doing, Mickey?" I ask.*
>
> *"I . . . I'm . . . going . . . to . . . tear . . . my . . . pants . . . legs . . . off," he says. "For . . . spirit . . . day."*
>
> *"Oh." All right, I think. I support school spirit.*
>
> *I leave him and circulate to chat with different students, but when I come back around again to his table, he's still yanking at his jeans.*
>
> *"Do . . . you . . . have . . . any . . . scissors . . . Mr. Gillespie?" Mickey says, just as Meaghan asks me to come over to talk to her table about some questions she has on the novel, and David raises his hand wanting clarification on the project for next week, and Sarah says from her corner she's sick of this Siddhartha guy and his self-absorption.*
>
> *"Uh, yeah," I tell Mickey, in full teacher mode, ringmaster in a three-ring circus. "Upper left-hand desk drawer."*
>
> *A couple of minutes later, sitting with Meaghan's group, I notice out of the corner of my eye students at Mickey's table slowly pulling away.*
>
> *"Uh, Mr. Gillespie," whispers Julie. "I think Mickey might need a little help there."*
>
> *I look over. Mickey has the big, sharp teacher scissors, and he's stabbing the air wildly as he tries to get a bead on his pants leg. Oh my gosh, what on earth was I thinking? But Nathan—cool guy, soccer star—saves the day.*
>
> *"Mickey," he says. "You want a little help?"*
>
> *"Sure," Mickey says, looking a bit sheepish, but definitely bemused.*
>
> *Nathan squats down on the floor, takes the scissors, and starts to cut at the stiff denim. He gets halfway around Mickey's leg but gets stuck at the thick seam. Amy tries to help him out by pulling the pant leg taut. I walk over and tell Nathan and Amy they can get back to reading their novels, and I'll give it a go for a while. Mickey thinks this is funny.*
>
> *So I end up on my knees, scissoring off the rest of Mickey's pant legs so he can have raggedy cut-offs and be part of Grunge Day, or whatever it is.*
>
> *Then it's almost time for the bell to ring, and students start to gather their eighty-pound backpacks to leave, and Julie gets the last word. "So, Mr. G.," she says. "Mickey will have something to say when he goes home tonight. It's not every day your English teacher cuts off your pants."*
>
> *The bell rings and the class ends with this beautiful laughter from Mickey and his classmates and me.*

End of notebook entry. But here's what it helps me say more clearly: Who can measure the value of Mickey's presence in my class? Who can talk about Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Act, without following Mickey around the last ten years? Who can tell me Mickey's personal assistant isn't worth the huge cost to society? What bland figures can assess what it means to Mickey to be included? What abstract cost-benefit analysis can measure what we have all learned from Mickey, the occasions for generosity and patience—and most of the time just normalness—his presence has offered? What's the worth of any policy that can't accommodate the lovely, long-lasting echo of that laughter?

Public discourse about schools needs our classroom stories to animate—to breathe life into—the too-often abstract narrative of educational policy.

The Narrative of Heroism

There's a second narrative of teaching that I think holds some dangers, and that's what I'll call the *narrative of heroism*. Tom Newkirk has talked about the "relentlessly optimistic" tone of lots of published writing about school: the accounts of foolproof methods, unqualified successes, great classroom triumphs.

The bestseller shelves and movie screens have been filled for the whole course of my teaching career with this heroic narrative whose story line is basically, "How I went into a rotten school with venal administrators and lazy colleagues and predatory students and by the application of my special skills and insights and heroic commitment—all by myself, of course, supported by no one else, no community of fellow teachers or parents—turned things around and then saved the world . . . oh, and then probably got fired." This is the John Wayne genre of the educational story: lone hero rides into town and single-handedly slays all the bad guys. You can easily name the films that enact some version of this narrative: *To Sir With Love, Stand and Deliver, Lean On Me, Dead Poets Society, Mr. Holland's Opus, Dangerous Minds*, and on and on.

Certainly, as teachers, we need inspirational stories—stories of hope and success in the classroom. In fact, I have liked most of these films. But what they convey to the general public is that educational success is more a matter of the dedicated individual teacher than the community's commitment of time, talent, and money to the common endeavor of schooling our children. Worse is the effect on us, because these romanticized tales of "super teachers" diminish and oversimplify our work. They offer Hollywood miracle cures in place of the real work of the classroom.

Margaret Edison, that wonderful young teacher who won the Pulitzer Prize for her stageplay *Wit* but prefers teaching kindergarten to writing theater, has said that teaching isn't about heroism but perseverance. It's long-haul work. And it's full of failures and everyday disappointments. We need the leavening of stories that admit this and show us how failure can be as instructive as it is destructive—and remind us that failure is part of the job.

Let me share a story of a small failure. This notebook entry is about a student I'll call Shannon, who came in after school for an individual writing conference about a college application essay that had been bothering her.

> *October 1997*
>
> *I sit down to confer with Shannon about a personal essay she wants to use on her college applications; she's been desperate to talk about it. Shannon is a terrific student, quiet and articulate and tough-minded, aiming for a hard-to-get-into school. "It's about my mom," she warns me.*
>
> *I know her history: the move to Oregon during seventh grade because of her father's job—new state, new school, the adjustment at that age hard. Then her mother started to feel ill, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and died in a matter of weeks. Now, five years later, Shannon has written an essay about her mom.*
>
> *I ask her to read the draft to me, but she says she'd rather I read it quietly and hands over the pages. I ask first what she's trying to get across, and she says, "All I really want is people not to feel sorry for me. I want to talk about what I learned from my mom when she died, but the last thing in the world I want is for anyone to pity me. I just can't stand that. If it seems like I'm exploiting my mom to get into any college, I'm not going to write about her at all."*
>
> *So I read, and I'm stunned to silence by Shannon's eloquent exploration of her complex feelings. Part of the essay is vexation at people who tiptoe or dance away when she wants to talk about her mother. Part of the essay is just bone-deep loss at feeling orphaned. Part of it is fear that she won't remember everything about her mother. Part of it is anger at her mother for being so absorbed in her teaching career and cheating Shannon out of their short time together, combined with admiration for her mother's commitment to teaching. Shannon thinks she wants to be a teacher, too. These powerful emotions, heartfelt, sometimes contradictory, none mawkish or clichéd, are packed, line by line, into two pages of essay. As an authentic account of a heart's burdens and confusions, it is eloquent. As an essay to get into college, it jumps around, rambles, and needs a central focus.*
>
> *But that's not what I'm mostly thinking about. I can hardly speak when I'm finished. My eyes get watery because I*

feel so strongly Shannon's loss, and she's sitting here in front of me, and she's such a great kid. "I don't know exactly what to tell you, Shannon," I say, "I'm so moved by . . . you know, by your mom's death." I don't want to be a tiptoer, but in the face of this tragic event in Shannon's life, it's too hard for me to distance the words on the page, to coldly critique or give advice. I want to connect to the writer, not correct the writing. She realizes this.

"Mr. Gillespie," Shannon tells me in what I recognize as a schoolteacher's tone of voice. "What I need for you to do is not worry about that, but to tell me what it's like as a piece of writing. I want this to get me into college, so you have to be tough and objective here." My sweet seventeen-year-old student is trying to get me to be less sentimental.

So we start to talk, and I stumble, still uncomfortable with the situation. I try to articulate how I think she packs too many different thoughts into the essay and how it could use a clearer focal point. But other problems elude my ability to express. Later, I can more clearly see what I needed to tell her. In her strong-willed effort not to be pitied, she comes across as colder than she truly is. The anger is amped up in the essay and the compassion turned down, so it's an unbalanced self-portrait; I don't think it captures Shannon's whole essence. But though it's easy to say things so efficiently here in the evening at my writing desk, the actual conversation was halting, awkward. Talking with Shannon, I was unsure and chattered too much, circling around things. The problem in my response was not one of conception or articulation, I think now, but one of feeling. I just could not bring myself to be too critical of the essay. I didn't want to be tough or objective. In the face of real, consequential, to-the-bone writing, I lost heart. I couldn't do what Shannon was asking me to do—say why I thought the essay didn't quite work. Shannon listened, asked questions, made a few notes, but was clearly confused about the obvious gap between what I was trying to say and what must have been on my face. She was frustrated. I was frustrated with myself. She left with a look of consternation on her face.

Next day. I see Shannon in the hall. "Shannon," I tell her, "I feel bad about our writing conference. I don't think it was very helpful to you. I'm sorry I wasn't clearer about my responses and suggestions."

"Well," she says, "It got me thinking. Something wasn't working in the essay. I started thinking that I hadn't talked enough about the things that I loved about my mom, the gifts she left me that would help a reader understand the other feelings, too. So I made that my main point and actually I'm feeling pretty good about my rewrite. So don't worry. I got what I needed."

Maybe part of Shannon's mother's legacy is generosity of spirit. Shannon has forgiven me for my failings and used them to help find her own way.

End of story, but not quite. That spring, Shannon surprised me by mentioning positively the time we'd spent on her essay about her mother those many months before. What I mostly remembered and had written about in my notebook was my sense of great insufficiency. But she remembered only that we'd tried to figure out for a half hour one day a way to stumble together toward an understanding of ourselves and each other. We reserve the word "unspeakable" for that which is excruciatingly painful or excruciatingly beautiful, and Shannon's essay on her mother had both qualities in abundance. She was trying to bring true words to an unspeakable experience. There's no lesson plan for that; nothing smaller than the whole world is suited for such a life-long quest to understand. And, some days, maybe the best we can do is walk with our students for a few steps on their quests, allow ourselves to listen to their confusion, and share ours.

I'm glad I wrote down this account of an inferior writing conference. The story reminds me that the narrative of heroism offers grand gestures when most of our successful work is really made up of small, halting moments of grace and connection.

The Narrative of Complaint

There's one final narrative I want to counteract with my notebook of classroom stories, the *narrative of complaint*. This is a pervasive, insidious discourse that comes from teachers ourselves. No one can deny that this work we do is bone-achingly hard, the constraints too often absurd, the obstacles to success formidable. Public bashings, institutional follies, and punky kids assail us daily. We have plenty to complain about. But even though there's something seductive about joining that back row of sneerers at the faculty meeting, or that table in the lunchroom where the dominant topic is griping about students, I have to resist. I just don't want to become one of those embittered teachers, bad-mouthing kids, the kids' parents, administrators, the world. It's too demoralizing and drives me away from my original purposes for joining this profession.

So I need a backlog of stories to counterbalance the difficulties of the work. By my habit of writing about my teaching, I can't falsely magnify the stories of frustrations and failures; rather, they're in there along with the stories of joys, insights, small victories, and pleasures. Let me finish by sharing two more brief excerpts from my teaching notebook, both moments of goofy delight and surprise.

> ***October 1999***
>
> *Early this morning, I was helping to judge the Homecoming float-building contest in the school parking lot. Kids had stayed up all night building their class floats. Neda and her friend Theresa, both student council members, both students of mine, were taking a break from their supervisory duties, sitting in the open door of a Volkswagen van, taking turns reading a book out loud together, it appeared. They called me over.*
>
> *"Mr. Gillespie, Mr. Gillespie," they yelled. "You've got to see us!"*
>
> *I strolled over. "Hey!"*
>
> *Theresa said, "We just thought it would warm your heart—you know, being of the Baby Boom generation and all—to see some of your students sitting in a VW van reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel!"*
>
> *And then we all giggled hysterically.*
>
> ***March 2000***
>
> *Eighth period, my prep period, walking out into the parking lot behind the building to grab a cardboard box of essays from my car, a small movement drew my attention. Three boys were tucked around a corner outside the science wing, almost invisible. They were all facing the wall, clustered close. I detoured from my car and angled their way. What're they doing? I wondered. The scene had the look of mischief. They weren't hearing me approach. Probably smoking ciggies or grass, I thought. But as I got closer and saw from behind their odd postures—heads down, arms held in front—I thought, oh man, they're urinating together on some spot on the ground. Brother! If this doesn't take all.*
>
> *"Okay," I barked in full authoritarian teacher voice. "What are you guys doing there?"*
>
> *They didn't jump in fright or guilt, zip up quickly or flick any incriminating butts away. They just turned and looked at me. I noticed that one had a garden trowel in his hand and that a little cross made of popsicle sticks with bits of colored paper fluttering from it was stuck into the ground. "We're just burying a fish," one said.*
>
> *Say what?*
>
> *Just then Kerry the science teacher stuck her head out a window. She must have heard me bellowing. "They volunteered to help me with a small ceremony. We lost one of the fish in our aquarium today."*
>
> *"Yeah," said one of the students in mock gravitas. "The little guy gave himself for our education."*
>
> *And mine, too, I could have added. So, embarrassed by my assumptions, I joined the circle, and we all thought hard about the little fish.*

The stories I write down have been my counter-narrative to modes of discourse about teaching I see as dangerous. The narratives of abstraction, heroism, and complaint all have a lot of power in the public sphere. So when I do my own teacher research, when I write in my notebook, and then when I tell and share my classroom stories publicly, I hope I'm doing a little bit to make the story of education in the civic arena slightly more concrete, realistic, and student centered.

But the most pernicious power of those negative narratives about teaching may be in the personal sphere, in the arena of the teacher's heart. So when I write about my teaching, I'm seeking perspective by keeping my own story of this intense work in all its sorrow and joy, challenge and success. This unvarnished account of my work helps keep me going as a teacher, the habit of writing having become a small ceremony of gratitude for a life of teaching.

TIM GILLESPIE teaches senior English, advanced placement English, and interdisciplinary studies at Lake Oswego High School, just outside of Portland, Oregon. Now in his twenty-ninth year as a teacher, he has taught fifth grade, eighth grade, and various high school assignments, from alternative school to journalism. Gillespie is a past president of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English and is affiliated with the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College.

Teaching Mining; Mining Teaching

PEGGY RILEY

When writer-teacher Peggy Riley comes into possession of a packet of poems written by her great-grandfather, she is challenged with "doing something" with them. As a writing teacher, she is sure she can come up with a way to explore the poems—from both historical and literary perspectives—that will enhance her classroom work. . . .

Last spring, my cousin came to visit, bearing a packet of poems written by his grandfather—my great-grandfather—Joseph D. Meagher, a coal miner who had lived and worked in Montana in the early 1900s. The poems, some typed, some handwritten in a flourishing script, and all except two carefully signed "by J. D. Meagher," cover an amazing range of ideas and experiences: working in the mines, farming, family reminiscences, a paean to a Monarch stove, dedications to local residents, thoughts on prohibition. The poems are not dated, but several clues point to the early part of the century as the time of their creation: the references to prohibition, the post-World War I surplus stationery on which some of the poems were printed, and, best of all, the poems themselves. J.D. begins one poem, "I was sixty-two last March, old friend, not a bad age for a man/Considering fifty-one of them were spent working in the mines." J.D. probably wrote most of the poems sometime between 1918 and the early 1920s.

J.D. Meagher, coal miner and poet

"You're the one to do something with these," my cousin told me.

I read the poems. Although unpolished, they intrigued me because they tell a story—an American story, a western story, and a personal story—of how an unschooled miner found identity and possibly an understanding of his life through poetry, language, writing. The combination of my cousin's explicit faith in me and my great-grandfather's implicit faith in the power of language forced me to consider what the "something" was that I might do with the poems. Surely, I thought, as a writing teacher, I would be able to come up with some way in which the poems might enhance my classroom work.

My first ideas for them came out of my experience as a part-time history teacher. As a historian, I realized that by researching J.D.'s time and place and locating the poems in a social and historical context, I could use them to flesh out an understanding of the Montana years J.D. experienced. I'm working on this idea (which is another paper), but I wasn't satisfied with that as an answer, so I turned to what I know best. I'm first and foremost an English teacher and a writing teacher—a person who preaches mightily of the power of the written word—and I had received a gift illustrating how writing and language can clarify a life. Certainly, I could find a way to use J.D.'s poems in my English classes.

At Las Positas Community College in Livermore, California, where I teach, the majority of students work—many of them full time—so I decided to share with them the poems J.D. wrote about his work as a miner. I was excited about the idea that J.D., a hard-working man, considered language and writing important enough to find the time and energy to write poetry. I hoped reading the poems would inspire the students to recognize how powerful writing can be outside as well as inside their academic lives.

To present the poetry to my students, I wrote a brief version of this piece to give the poems some context. In class, I spoke a bit about the poems and about J.D.'s story. I then elicited the students' responses in reading logs, encouraging them to give free rein to their ideas. Perhaps they would want to say something about their own work? Perhaps something about workers they knew? Perhaps write a poem? Perhaps . . . what?

"Just go for it," I told myself.

I also enlisted the support of my colleague, Elena Cole. Elena was teaching English 1A, a freshman composition class, and piloting a section focused specifically on workplace issues, targeted toward students in vocational or business majors. I thought J.D.'s work-based poems would complement the course readings, providing the students with a unique angle for writing and reflecting on work. Elena distributed my brief written introduction to her students and, as I had, asked for their responses in their reading logs. After the students read and responded to the poems, I visited her class and spoke to them about J.D.'s story as I had to my students. I wondered if these English 1A students' responses would be appreciably different from the responses of my basic-skills students.

Neither Elena's English 1A students nor my basic-skills students responded in those "perhaps" ways I had half anticipated and half wished for. But in telling J.D.'s story, reading the students' logs, responding to their questions, and listening to their voices, I learned some valuable lessons both about students and about myself as a teacher.

I included three of J.D.'s mining poems and the opening lines from a fourth in the piece I wrote for the students. I began with an excerpt, which, together with the lines quoted above—"I was sixty-two last March, old friend, not a bad age for a man/ Considering fifty-one of them were spent working in the mines"—establishes J.D.'s lifelong work as a miner. The excerpt explains how J.D. started out in his trade:

> *When I was a little boy, my Dad was*
> *killed*
> *While working in the Arnot mines,*
> *God willed;*
> *On August 10, in '68, eleven I was then,*
> *September first found me at work, my*
> *apprenticeship began.*

Many students were startled at the idea of an eleven-year-old child going to work. "I couldn't imagine what it would have been like back then when your father dies and you have to pick up where he left off. I couldn't imagine an eleven-year-old who is too young and little to handle such a hazardous occupation," wrote one of my basic-skills students.

Another agreed: "It really made me stop and think about how good I have it."

One freshman composition student, however, was familiar with "how it is for the men to have to go to work at a very young age," explaining, "My family are all ranchers and have been for over three generations, and even nowadays it's very hard, very tiring work."

Most students, though, couldn't imagine the situation. "He started mining at eleven. Eleven—who would ever think an eleven

Miners Make the World Go Around

Of all the occupations in the multitude of crafts,
The miners have it on them all without a bit of graft.
They are loyal to their Union, and undivided stand;
The concern of one is the concern of all within our land.
I care not what your occupation, or how you earn your bread;
Remove the coal we dig and your occupation's dead.
This is a big assertion, but the truth of it we learn
From the dreadful situation when we ask for what we earn.
Snap judgment isn't just or right on so big a thing to pass;
Unless you know your subject, don't make yourself an ass.
Newspapers every day do this and individuals too,
To get public opinion with the men who grafted you.
Consider, please, the time we lose when coal is not consumed;
Insurance for our lives is barred, too hazardous it's presumed.
And life's great toll extracted from the men who dig the coal
Now multiply each year, while compensation charity doles.
So size up the situation in any light you will,
The operators have played hog and now would save the till.
They have silenced the industries of dear old Uncle Sam;
A Parvenu crowd they are and don't give a D—.

year old would be working to support his family? I guess most people take the lifestyle we have for granted," one student wrote.

Another student added, "I'm wondering if J.D. did the regular kid stuff like play ball with friends, make tree forts, or just throw rocks in the nearby creek."

After establishing that J.D. was a life-long miner, I included the poem he titled "Miners Make the World Go Around." In this poem, J.D. exposes the mine operators as bosses who exploited the workers but didn't hesitate to let them go when times were tough, no matter how industrious or loyal the worker.

J.D. wrote this poem soon after the end of World War I; the mines were closing down because the wartime demand for raw materials fell dramatically. I couldn't expect my students to know the history of coal mining and union issues, but I thought they might respond by talking about the experiences they had had with bosses. They didn't. Perhaps the topicality of the poem made it less accessible.

But two basic-skills students commented specifically on this poem. "I like the fact that J.D. accepts the fact that he is a coal miner and lives with [it], knowing that there are so many risks," said one. And another observed, "One part 'Insurance for our lives is barred, too hazardous it's presumed.' I thought that this part was interesting because it is saying that the workers are "barred" from death insurance because it is such a high-risk occupation." Despite the great differences between J.D.'s life and their own lives, students could empathize with certain elements of J.D.'s experience.

If students were unfamiliar with the history and union issues in "Miners Make the World Go Around," they nevertheless understood the risky nature of mining. In responding to J.D.'s elegiac poem, "In Memory of My Brother Jim," students recognized both the miners' dangerous work and the poignancy of a miner's life and death:

One basic-skills student wrote, "My particular favorite was the poem about Joseph's brother, who was a great man and who was another victim of the tragic trade of being a miner. In the days these poems were written, there was no workmen's comp or job security," reiterating the expectations many students have about their own working lives.

The sadness and resignation underlying the poem concerned not only working but also family, and students responded to this aspect of the poem, too. "I thought this poem was sort of touching how Meagher writes a whole poem about his brother," said a basic-skills student.

Commented another, "J.D. talks about the kind of man his brother was. His brother was a good man, but died on the job as many men did while working in the mines. It's kind of a sad story for these men who worked in the mines at an early age and continued to do so for the rest of their lives."

And a third student wrote, "I thought it was rather sad when he wrote 'When he gave a child to carry Uncle Sam's guns' because it seems as though he is basically raising his children to have them taken away by war." None of the students, however, mentioned workers from their own families as I had anticipated.

J.D.'s poem, "To the Man Who Can Whistle and Sing," was the favorite of many

In Memory of My Brother Jim

He coaled a train at Pittsburg
And to New York made the run,
Then he coaled a fleet that carried our flag
That went to the rising sun.
And it warmed his heart,
For he played his part
As a good American son.
He raised a family—half a score
Of daughters and of sons,
And again he smiled
When he gave a child
To carry Uncle Sam's guns.
But the story is old,
When all is told, he died as he had lived,
And when too late he knew his fate,
A victim of the mining trade.
For forty years he swung the pick,
His State he sure niched,
And out of his toil
They gathered the spoil
The pound of flesh they pilch.
With many a fight to increase his might
And tow'ring from the power that be
A little more toll for digging coal
And he died when it was in sight.
With a rake and a spade a garden he made,
Where nothing but weeds would grow,
And without despair he gave it care
To garner the good that came.
For as a miner he knew what he'd have to do
To hoard for the days it rained.
And he made the race with sacrifice
From murmuring he refrained;
And so one day he laid away
The pick, the shovel and drill;
He waited the merciful call of God
And now lies on Johnston hill.

students, both basic-skills and freshman composition. This poem reveals the importance J.D. places on work as a part of a man's character along with the qualities he attributes to a good partner. He praises the hardworking, cheerful miner and condemns those who don't contribute the same wholehearted effort.

In responding to this poem, students came closest to talking about their own work experiences. These responses were also the longest, suggesting that this poem really hit a chord in the students' working lives. Said a freshman composition student:

> *My favorite is the poem about the whistling miner. I can relate to his point of view. Work, the gloomy kind, can go by at least a little better if you were cheerful about something. You don't have to enjoy your work, but you don't have to be a thorn in someone's foot about it. Just do the best you can and be content to have what you do.*

And another wrote:

> *I really enjoyed the poem "To the Man Who Can Whistle and Sing." I guess I like it because I can relate to it. I always enjoy someone working without complaining and if he does it with joy it's a tremendous plus. I notice that the day seems to breeze by in a much better atmosphere. I always wonder what makes the guy so cheery, how they find joy in the mundane, maybe he has found his love. Either way those kind are a pleasure to work with.*

A basic-skills student made the same point from another angle:

> *I like J.D.'s point about how he liked to work with cheerful people and hardworking people and how that made working more enjoyable. I agree with this point a whole lot because who really wants to work with people they do not enjoy being around that would just make work really crappy.*

Two freshman composition students found some insight into J.D.'s character in the poem. One wrote, "You can tell that J.D. Meagher was a proud miner and enjoyed his work. He only wanted to be around others who enjoyed their work, too."

Commented the other:

> *I admire the author for his outlook on mining and life in general. I especially like the poem in which he tells about working with different kinds of men, and his preference of a man that sings and whistles. I wonder if he was one of these men, because it seems that he approached mining as much more than just a job.*

And one basic-skills student found J.D.'s poem an inspiration:

> *I wonder if he is able to always keep his head up and be joyful at work. If so, that's a great quality. I am not the type of person who is always happy on the job. But I would love to be. I think this poem really challenged me to cheer up, because it is contagious.*

Many students responded to the collection rather than to the individual poems. As one freshman composition student wrote, "It is absolutely extraordinary to be able to take a look into the life of someone from a different time period. His poems really gave a good sense of feel for the conditions and emotions of the time."

Another was full of admiration for a man who "educated himself to be able to express himself in his various poems." The student continued, "I also write poetry and find them to be an excellent source of self-expression. But given the educators, books, and assistance that I have been given, to enable me to write poems, I have had it extremely easy compared to him."

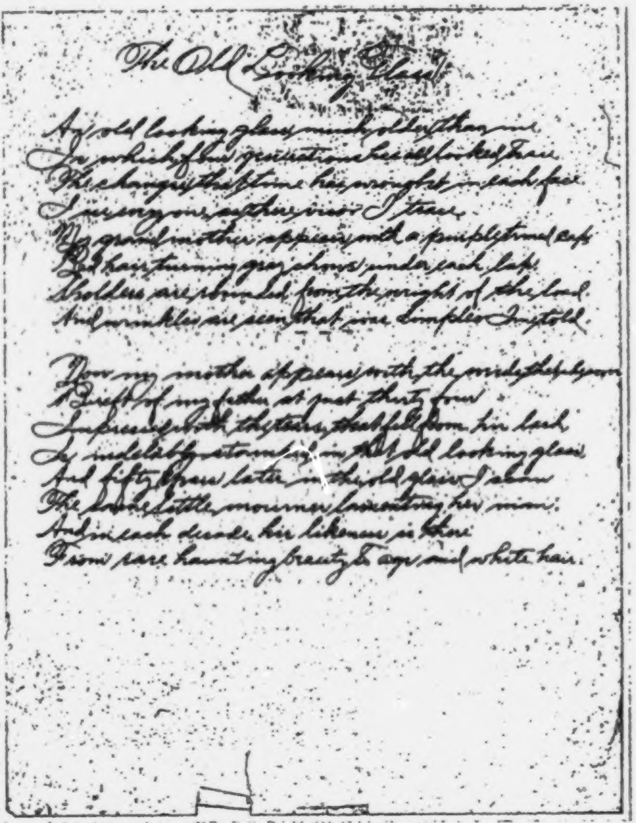
Another student agreed, "J.D.'s writing shows that even though life may be tough, you have to remember the good points."

After reading the poems, one basic-skills student said she "realized how poetry could help a person through hard times."

To the Man Who Can Whistle and Sing

I like to work with a whistling man,
One that will whistle and sing.
That never does things with a crash and a bang,
But with ease he accomplishes the thing.
I have worked with the silent plodding kind,
Whose thoughts they never express;
I never knew what was on their minds,
Their motives I never could guess.
They worked as though they never planned ahead,
And always anxious to quit,
Always ready to munch meat and bread,
And must visit or have a fit.
They never missed a local meet;
But an office they never would hold;
They never were ready a donation to greet,
And in strikes their feet got cold.
Give me the man who can whistle and sing;
He banishes the gloom digging coal.
Ever ready to advance the things
Put forward to meet our goal.

Another student wondered "why he chose to write poems instead of stories or something else." An international student in Elena's freshman composition class found an answer to that question. After admitting that she found poems difficult to read, even in her native Japanese, she wrote, "I think he had many thoughts and had to express them in some way, which was poem for him. Very amazing story. I wonder if my great grandfather wrote a poem or not …"



A sample of J.D. Meagher's poetry in his own handwriting

I began this project with a vague notion that students would use the poems as models through which they might examine their own work experiences. I also wondered how the responses of my basic-skills students might differ from those of Elena's freshman composition students who were studying, reading, and writing about workplace issues, but there was no appreciable difference. In regard to focusing on the poems as models, I realized I was expecting students to take an abstract leap to consider their present or anticipated working lives through what probably appeared to them yet another academic exercise (the reading logs). Instead, they responded to J.D.'s very human story: a man, his work, his family. They compared J.D.'s life to their own and, in many cases, came to appreciate much of what they had taken for granted: school, employment benefits, whistling co-workers, throwing rocks in a nearby creek. It goes to show that students learn because of our intentions and our passions—and in spite of our assumptions.

As well, the project reminded me of the power of "real" writing. When Elena Cole surveyed her students at the end of the semester, asking which readings they most enjoyed, two of the students chose the poems, even though they were not on the reading list. Students in both classes were fascinated that the poems were from my family; they liked knowing this personal aspect of my life. Many wanted to know more about my research and the writing I am doing. Real writing from real people, like my writing and my great-grandfather's writing, makes reading and writing relevant.

In sharing my great-grandfather's poems with students, I've come to treasure them even more than I had before. It has been a very personal experience, one that reaches beyond the textbook and into the life of a man who believed in the power of language and writing.

Afterword

Joseph D. Meagher left Montana in the early 1920s, forced out by drought, by unemployment when the mines closed down, and by poor health. With his wife and two youngest daughters, J.D. moved to Los Angeles. He died in 1928 of bronchial pneumonia, a "victim of the mining trade" like his brother Jim.

And about the poems themselves? I don't know if J.D. shared the poems with others—family or friends—or whether he wrote them simply for his own expression. My cousin found the poems in his mother's effects after she died; his mother was J.D.'s youngest daughter. Who knows how long the poems had languished unread. Sharing the poems with my students, writing about them, wondering about them, and listening to them has returned the poems and J.D.'s voice to life.

Peggy Riley teaches at Las Positas Community College in Livermore, California, and is a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Matching Reading Models and Strategies

MARY FRANCES LANDENWICH

Teacher Mary Frances Landenwich discovers that the skill-and-drill activities used in teaching students to read often do little toward teaching those students to comprehend what they read. Through this realization, Landenwich institutes a more meaning-centered teaching style that, in turn, leads her toward some productive pairings of reading models and strategies.

My undergraduate studies in education little prepared me for the real classroom. I remember my first assignment as a teacher of twenty-nine third-graders. I was given manual after manual for teaching spelling, math, social studies, and the basal reader. I followed the teaching manuals, presenting skill after skill to these eager faces. We learned vowels, blends, suffixes, prefixes, multiplication facts, vocabulary, and more from the honored ditto sheet. My students, and—I must admit—I, too, loved to smell the purple ink from the dittos before we pulled up our sleeves and plunged into this wonderful learning activity. We were all quite proficient—and fast—at these activities. My students could whip them out at a rate of one sheet every ten minutes. And I could always find more and more for them to do. As they read aloud to me in their basal readers, I knew I had taught them to read. Or had I?

It didn't take long to realize this skill and drill did little for their comprehension of the text. Oh, yes, they could read the words on the page quite fluently. To anyone listening, my students could clearly read. But many could not derive meaning from what they read. Some could recall a few factual details, but fewer could make inferences about the text or relate the text to their own lives. I was disheartened. All I had taught them was decoding.

It has been years since this burning issue began to nag at me. I have since taught fourth, fifth, and seventh grades. Amazingly, I have found that lack of comprehension is prevalent in students of every grade. Well, no wonder. If there is no meaning coming from the page, reading is a useless activity only tolerated during the six and a half hours of the school day to keep the teacher from hassling you.

I became determined to find a way to really teach kids to read. Through professional reading of books such as *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop*, by Shelley Harwayne (1993), and *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents*, by Linda Rief and Nancie Atwell (1992), I began to embrace a different view of teaching literacy. My teaching became less skill based and more meaning centered. I stocked my classroom shelves with good literature toward which I knew my students would gravitate. Time was provided every day for book selection and reading. Linda Rief provided the rationale needed to make my workshop approach successful. She described literacy as a process approach that was far distant from my skill-drill-test approach. I began to assess my students for their strengths and weaknesses instead of right or wrong answers, supporting them along their literacy journey with what they needed instructionally at the moment.

I observed a definite change in many of my students. Most showed more eagerness to read, and class book discussions clearly reflected an increase in comprehension of text. But my efforts saw only minimal results with my lower-achieving students. There was a spark initially. My lower-achieving students loved looking at the back cover to see what the book was about. But as they sat down to read, most could not stay with the book. It was too much effort to really read. I realized these students needed more support, but I knew skill-drill wasn't the answer. I discovered another piece of the literacy puzzle when I was accepted into the Louisville Writing Project's summer institute. During this institute, I was nurtured as a writer and a professional. I was immersed into a supportive learning community that allowed risk taking and meaningful dialogue with colleagues. This experience taught me the value of developing a caring and supportive community in my own classroom where students engage in dialogue and construct meaning for themselves. It was apparent I must not only allow for a varied and rich print environment, but I must also provide opportunities for students to engage in constructive talk about books.

In his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (1994), Harvey Daniels introduced a reading model that would engage my students in constructive book talk. I implemented literature circles the following school year with great success for many of my students. They were motivated to read and enjoyed the social interaction of the circles. These quality book discussions challenged my students to expand their thinking. Standardized test scores of my lower-achieving readers, however, showed few gains at the end of the year. This did not discourage me, for I knew tests could not measure enthusiasm, and enthusiasm was the first step to improving reading.

Last summer, I participated in an advanced reading institute hosted by the Louisville Writing Project. The focus was solely on reading strategies that promote better reading comprehension. Through this concentrated study of strategies that good readers use to comprehend text, I realized I must be very intentional in teaching them to my students. But what intrigued me more was a book called *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (Keene and Zimmermann 1997).

This book introduced strategies like prediction, connections, and visualization—strategies that did not appear at first glance to be reading comprehension at all. However, as an accomplished reader, I know I use these strategies to make text meaningful. Keene and Zimmermann describe text-to-self connections as making the reader aware of the relevance the text has to his or her own life. These connections can be made with characters in the text and the reader's personal experiences. Prediction helps readers use critical thinking skills and problem solving. By actively predicting while reading, readers reflect and evaluate the text, thereby extracting deeper meaning. Visualization is a strategy whereby the reader creates mental images of the text. By making visual images, students can better understand text.

I had two components of a successful literacy program already: a literature-rich environment and a community of learners using social interaction to construct meaning. The third component, I came to understand, is the intentional instruction in strategies that require the reader to make personal connections with text.

Research Question

My classroom action research began with the question "What gains are made in lower-achieving students' comprehension when reading strategies are intentionally taught within three different reading models?" As my research progressed, however, it became clear that I already knew the reading strategies were effective in teaching kids to comprehend better because they were supported by research. What I didn't know was if reading strategies could be learned more easily within certain teaching models. A more defined question surfaced: "Which literature-based reading models best support the learning of different reading strategies?"

Literature circles, student self-selection of books, and whole-class reads are examples of literature-based reading models I utilized in my fifth grade classroom. Literature circles, as described by Harvey Daniels, allow for the temporary formation of groups of students who have selected the same book. Students monitor their own reading assignments and discussions. Roles such as discussion director and summarizer are assumed by members of each literature group to facilitate book discussion. Upon completion, I require each group to present its book to the class.

Self-selection is a model employed by many teachers. Students choose books from a wide variety of quality literature. I monitor my fifth-graders' silent reading by using a reader's response log. Culminating activities often take the form of book talks or book reviews.

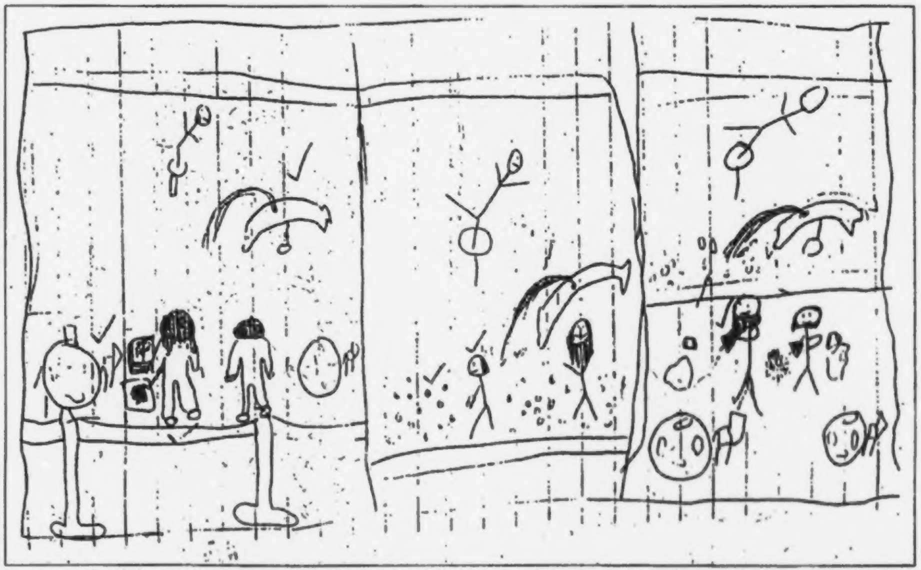
The whole-class read is the traditional model of teaching reading without using a basal reader. The entire class reads a book selected by the teacher. I choose books that expose my students to literacy conventions and critical social issues.

For my research, I chose three students from each of my fifth grade language arts classes who scored the lowest, average, and highest by stanine in reading comprehension on the Standford Diagnostic Test administered to all fifth-graders in my school at the beginning of the year. These students were selected not only by stanine score, but because they did not have any severe emotional, physical, or learning disabilities that would impede learning. After selection, I interviewed the nine students to find out what they knew, if anything, about the reading strategies of prediction, visualization, and text-to-self. Along with each interview, I gave a pretest on each strategy. I used a passage from a fifth grade basal reader that was applicable to the specific reading strategy and asked the students to apply the strategy by sketching for visualization, or by writing a prediction or text-to-self-response. Most students knew what prediction was and could apply the strategy to the passage.

Students gave their best guesses for visualization and text-to-self but were unfamiliar with the terminology. I briefly explained the strategy before they read the passage, but only the highest achievers grasped the idea. I introduced visualization to the entire class as a minilesson before we began a whole-class read using *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* by E. L. Konigsburg. We spent several days practicing seeing the "moving picture" in our heads and doing quick sketches of these mental images in our response logs. I did not allow much time for the students to sketch so they wouldn't get bogged down trying to be artists. Instead, I emphasized the importance of drawing the picture that was playing in their heads as they read. During our practice, students exchanged sketches and studied the pictures as I reread the passage to the class. As I read, students would put a check mark on details of each other's sketches about which they had heard me read. This became a rather enjoyable activity for them. Each day, students tried to receive more check marks on their sketches, thus revealing more retained images. When I was sure the strategy was well understood, we began the class read. Instead of answering questions after each chapter, students were required to visualize a scene from the chapter. I monitored the class's progress with the strategy through these sketches. My final assessment of visualization required the students to read a passage taken from a fifth grade basal reader and to sketch the images they had of the scene.

I felt it would be useful to pair the prediction strategy with the literature circle model. After reading and discussing on the first day of literature circles, students returned to their response logs and predicted what might happen next in their books. Before reading the next day, the group shared their predictions and gave reasons to support them. While visiting each group, I heard, "See, I told you Ralph would be caught!" or "I never thought that would happen." Class discussions centered on why some predictions were right, some were "partially" right, and some were not right at all. Students would then reflect in their logs about their prediction and again predict the next day's reading. I monitored the learning of the strategy by reading log entries and class discussions. Final assessment of the prediction strategy was having the students read the first half of a short story in their basal reader and predict the ending.

Before students chose books for their independent, self-selection reading, I gave a series of minilessons to the entire class on the reading strategy text-to-self connections. I used "think-alouds" to help students understand the strategy. I read several books aloud to the class, stopping to think out loud about passages and how they

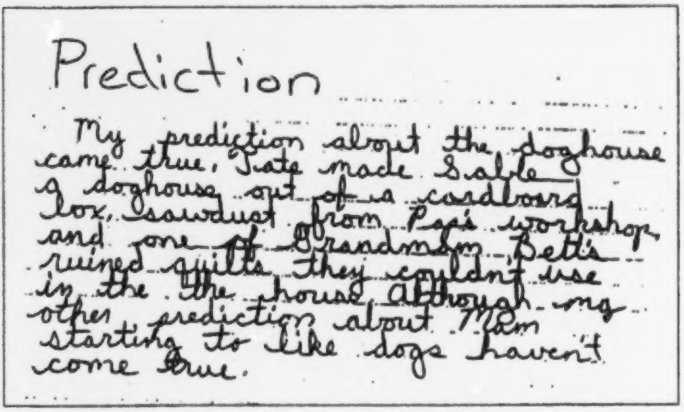


An example of the reading strategy visualization, with classmates' check marks on images they recognized from the story related to my personal life. These think-alouds were followed by class discussion on ways the passage related to my students. After I was confident students understood the strategy, they chose their books. Students were given twenty to thirty minutes daily to read silently and then respond in their learning logs with text-to-self connections. I gave daily guidance with this strategy by asking students to respond to specific questions like "What character is most like you?" or "Tell me about a time you had a similar experience." I monitored the learning of this reading strategy by critiquing the daily learning log and providing feedback. The final assessment was based on reviewing the response log.

Findings

My action research took approximately three months to complete. I paired reading strategies with reading models to see which ones best supported the learning of the strategy with three different fifth grade language arts classes, I came to similar conclusions: A few surprises and many new questions surfaced from this experience. Most of all, I realized the value of doing classroom research.

I was certain that teaching the reading strategy prediction would be an easy task. After all, teachers from preschool on use this strategy while reading aloud to students. But I was wrong. My students clearly understood what prediction was. While they could easily tell me what they thought would happen in a book, they had not learned to use prediction as a strategy while they read. Initially, students predicted too far ahead; while reading chapter two, predicting the ending does not help one anticipate what will happen in chapter three. I realized I must provide step-by-step instruction on using this strategy if students were going to internalize its benefits.



Prediction

My prediction about the doghouse came true. Tate made Sable a doghouse out of a cardboard box, sawdust from Pop's workshop and one of Grandmom Bett's ruined quilts they couldn't use in the the house although my other prediction about Mom starting to like dogs haven't come true.

An example of the strategy prediction from Landenwich's classroom

After each literature circle read and discussed the day's reading, I had each student write down three things they knew from the reading. Based on these three things, they were then to write down a prediction of what would happen in tomorrow's reading. This was needed to get kids to realize that predictions must be based on information learned through prior reading. Each member of the group shared predictions before reading the next day. In addition, each student explained why they thought as they did. This sparked discussion even before the group began reading. In one group that was reading *Stealing Home*, a biography of Jackie Robinson, I heard, "I think Jackie is going to get a scholarship to school because they don't have any money" and "How could he become great if he doesn't go to school to play on a team?" Another member of the group responded, "Maybe he has a rich uncle that will pay his way?"

After much struggling, students began internalizing this strategy as they read. It was very common to hear students shout, "I was right!" as the group was reading. Other students would leave their groups to show me exactly in the book where their predictions had come true. We always revisited our predictions in our response logs and wrote why we thought we had been right or wrong. Interestingly, some students were partially right or their prediction came true later.

In analyzing this strategy within this reading model, I realized student conversation about prediction greatly supported their learning. Listening to other students predict stirred thoughts in those who were reluctant. I think this model also aided students who struggled with reading comprehension. The group supports comprehension by reading aloud, discussing the book, and sharing ideas. I feel the literature circle model greatly facilitated the learning of prediction. Analyzing the response logs, students showed improvement in all three classes. Lower-achieving students improved as much as average and high achievers.

I chose visualization to teach within the whole-class read because I expected the strategy to be difficult and need lots of teacher reinforcement. I was wrong. Students easily learned the strategy and received the reinforcement from each other. The term *visualization* was new to most of my students. But, once it was explained, it turned out to be a strategy that a handful of students already used. As you might expect, these were my quick and skillful readers. One student described it as "reading without seeing the words." This brought the admiration of the entire class and comments such as "How do you do that?"

Students caught on to this strategy quickly. They were very motivated by drawing and challenged themselves to add more detail to their sketches. As we read a book aloud, I would stop and ask the students to visualize the scene. They would share their images. In *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* great discussions took place over scenes like the janitor mopping the men's restroom of the art museum. Some students visualized him dressed in light blue with his name on the left pocket; others saw him in all gray with a red rag hanging out of his back pocket.

Students learned from each other by checking each other's sketches. They tried to get more and more checks. Many times, students would ask questions about sketches that clearly showed advanced thought. For example, in one scene, there was a rope marking off the fountain in the museum. One student put a guard by the rope to ensure no one played in the fountain. However, this was not in the book. It clearly showed the student was basing visualization on a personal experience, as all good readers do.

Students became engaged in strategy talk. They discussed their individual successes with visualization, saying, "I see it in my head sometimes, then it goes," or "I sometimes visualize after I read and sit and think back on it." Visualization and the whole-class read are a good match of reading strategy and reading model.

I paired the text-to-self strategy with the independent self-selection model because the model focuses on the student's interaction with the book. After I modeled with think-alouds, the students read every day and wrote their text-to-self connections in their response logs. It was a very difficult strategy for students. After silent reading, many students would moan or just sit there thinking. They complained of not connecting to anything they read. Students required a lot of individual attention and prompting to get any response at all. Response logs were initially very brief and did not improve as the reading continued.

I responded to their moaning by modeling again with think-alouds. They could do it with me and seemed to understand the strategy, but when they were left to be independent, they were not productive. I concluded the text-to-self strategy needs more social interaction to be successful. The independent self-selection model doesn't allow for discussion of books with others who read the same books. The only interaction is with the student and the text. Young readers, still learning strategy, need others to support them through discussions and peer modeling.

Potential Significance

My fifth-graders internalized the reading strategy prediction when it was taught within the literature circle model. I believe the success of this pairing suggests that peer discussion and group support facilitated learning of the prediction strategy. I believe this to be an effective match of reading strategy and reading model.

The whole-class reading model and the reading strategy visualization was also a successful pairing. Students at every level were motivated by illustrating the "moving picture" in their heads. Sketches of these visual images improved in depth and detail as the reading progressed. Students became more metacognitive. It was, however, not my great guidance that helped students internalize this strategy. It was more the interaction the students had with one another's sketches.

Surprisingly, the text-to-self strategy and the independent self-selection read was not a successful pairing. Students clearly could not conceptualize this strategy without the support of discussion and peer modeling.

References

Daniels, Harvey. 1994. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Harwayne, Shelley. 1993. *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Keene, Ellin Oliver, and Susan Zimmermann. 1999. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rief, Linda, and Nancie Atwell. 1992. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Mary Frances Landenwich is a teacher-consultant with the Louisville Writing Project. She teaches seventh grade language arts at Highland Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time of this research, she taught fifth grade.

This piece, reprinted with permission, originally appeared in the *Louisville Writing Project Network News 19* (2), Winter 2000.

Portfolios That Make a Difference

A Four-Year Journey

JUDITH RUHANA

The following article is a chapter from the soon-to-be-released National Writing Project title, The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios. *The book, edited by Mary Ann Smith and Jane Juska, will be released in November 2001. In this piece, an Illinois middle-school teacher recounts her history with classroom portfolios and talks about how her students' portfolio work continues to impress and humble her.*

"What do you know about portfolios?" This question came from the human services director interviewing me for the job I now have.

"Absolutely nothing!" I thought.

But I wanted the job so I made something up—quickly. I knew that in art, a portfolio is a collection gathered together to show off the artist's best work, so I transferred this definition to language arts: "It's a collection of writing gathered together to show the student's ability," I said.

My stab at an explanation must have been good enough because I got the job; however, that question "What do you know about portfolios?" did not go away. Rather, it started me on a year-long quest to find out as much as I could. I read everything I could get my hands on.

In the end, I decided that portfolios had nothing to do with me. I convinced myself that all those classrooms using portfolios were not full of normal kids, were not public schools, did not have heterogeneous groupings, did not have minorities, did not have English language learners or bilingual students, did not have 33 percent of the population on free and reduced lunches, did not have normal teachers. Teaching in the "real world" made the very thought of portfolios seem overwhelming. I had no idea how to get started.

I teach in Nichols Middle School in Evanston, Illinois, a public, urban, multicultural school with many disadvantaged students. I have six classes of language arts—writing only—and about 125 students. How could I deal with portfolio assessment? The sheer volume of papers required to carry out this process with all these students seemed daunting. I wouldn't even be able to store all that paper.

But events overtook my objections. I wanted to put out an end-of-the-year student literary magazine, and for this project I needed to collect and store student work. I managed the logistics of this undertaking with enough ease that I began again to consider portfolios for my classroom.

Year One

During the summer, I figured out a system. Every student would have a large plastic folder for the storage of his or her work, and each class would place these folders in six different colored milk crates—one crate per period. With this class management problem solved, I could now think about the "what," "how," and "why" of portfolio assessment. I soon realized that my problem had never been with the "why." From the time I started my investigation, I was convinced that portfolios were a form of good practice that led to authentic assessment. My concerns had been the "how." I needed a model.

The model I chose came from the Kentucky Department of Education (figure 1). Kentucky requires that eighth-graders select five pieces of work from their year's worth of writing. Although any of the entries may come from study areas other than English/language arts, a minimum of one piece must come from another study area. The portfolio requirement includes: one personal narrative, one piece of fiction, and one personal selection. In addition, two pieces of the portfolio should contain writing that achieves one or more of the following purposes: predicts an outcome; defends a position; analyzes a situation, person, place, or thing; solves a problem; explains a process or concept; draws a conclusion; or creates a model.

Each student is also required to write a letter reflecting on his or her growth as a writer and on the pieces in the portfolio. Good. A letter I could handle. Compared to the formal research paper students write in the spring as part of a huge interdisciplinary unit, a letter would be easier to evaluate and more interesting for me to read.

I had the program in place in September. I showed the students the portfolio requirements the first month of school and encouraged but did not demand that they save all their work—both good and not so good—in their classroom portfolios.

At the end of the year, students enjoyed writing the reflective letter to me, their last say on what they did that year in my class. I liked the letter format because students already had experience with letter writing, and even the students who found writing difficult felt secure in writing a letter to their teacher.

What I didn't realize or expect was the ease with which my students looked at their own work, what they already knew about their writing, and how their perspectives helped my understanding of them. Portfolio assessment opened channels of communication with them that were both real and profound. This experiment gave students their own voice in my classroom, and I found myself listening.

Students were helping me better understand the connection between their topic and the quality of their writing.

> *Writing about something that was very personal and emotional to me made my writing more effective. When your heart is really part of something, I think you can write about it better because you really understand and feel the emotions you are trying to express. —Lyesha*

> *I chose this narrative essay . . . because I really hated it and I didn't get a good grade on it. This essay was really hard for me to write about because I don't like the topic and it wasn't really true because I made up a lot of it. Another reason why I didn't like writing this was because I don't like writing things that really happened. If I have to tell about things that really happened I never tell them so that they sound as good as they were. I feel like what's the point if it doesn't sound as good as it really was? —Martha*

KIRIS Writing Portfolio Assessment

Contents of the Grade 8 Portfolio

Any of the following portfolio entries may come from study areas other than English/Language Arts, but a minimum of *one* piece of writing *must* come from another study area.

Table of Contents: Include the title or descriptor of each portfolio entry, the study area for which the piece was written, and the page number in the portfolio.

1. A Letter to the Reviewer: A letter written by the student discussing his/her growth as a writer and reflecting on the pieces in the portfolio.

2. One Personal Narrative

3–4. Two Pieces of Writing, each of which achieves any one or more of the following purposes:

   a. Predict an Outcome
   b. Defend a Position
   c. Analyze or Evaluate a Situation, Person, Place, or Thing
   d. Solve a Problem
   e. Explain a Process or Concept
   f. Draw a Conclusion
   g. Create a Model

5. One Short Story, Poem, Play/Script, or other piece of Fiction

6. A Personal Selection: One additional piece of writing that the student wishes to include.

Used with permission of the Kentucky Department of Education, Frankfort, Kentucky 40601.

Figure 1

Some wrote confessions that they might have had trouble making face-to-face:

> *I am sorry to say that I rushed this assignment, putting no effort into it whatsoever. . . . I had no intention of doing a good job. There was not enough information and it was very brief for a report. . . . I chose this writing so that it could remind me to devote more time and effort to my assignments. —Jose*

> *Another weakness of this paper was I didn't have very much time to write it because I had to go to Florida the next day. This is the reason I had to turn it in early and didn't have time to think about it. —Martha*

But other students complained, and, as is true for many teachers, the complaints were what grabbed my attention.

> *How can you expect me to remember what I did writing this piece when all I can remember is that I got an F! —Ben*

> *I couldn't find anything in my portfolio that was from another subject and the teachers were mad at me when I asked them for old work! —Julia*

> *I don't have enough work to choose from so why are you making us do this? —Anne*

> *I don't know how to reflect on my own work. Isn't that your job?—Chad*

Ben was right. What was the point of asking students to reflect on some piece they had composed several months ago and hardly remembered writing?

Julia and Anne were right. My directions had been vague. I "encourage" students to save their work, but this kind of mild suggestion often washes right by middle school students, who have plenty of other things on their minds.

And, finally, Chad was right. I had never taught students how to reflect, and even if I did not agree with Chad that reflecting on student work was entirely my responsibility and not theirs, if I expected students to think about their writing and themselves as writers, I needed to teach them how and why to do this work.

I realized that these student reflections went beyond insights into their writing; they were also comments on my teaching practices. To the extent that these practices reflected my poor planning, I vowed to change.

Year Two

Having Enough Work to Choose from: Learning from Julia and Anne

Before the next school year began, I persuaded the other team teachers for our grade level to cooperate in gathering writing pieces for my students. Sometimes these teachers gave me written pieces, sometimes I copied the pieces and they kept them, and sometimes they gave the work to the students to put in their language-arts portfolios. We core teachers—literature, language arts, social studies, science—began to communicate more on writing across the curriculum, and the students began to apply what they learned in language arts to their other subjects. The students would often moan, "Oh, no, you're looking at our writing in the other subjects, too," and "That's terrible!" What they meant was, "Oh, no, we have to write effectively in all the subjects now!"

Another simple change I made at the onset of the second year was to tell students that they could never take their portfolios out of the classroom, not even to their lockers. The portfolio envelopes remained in my classroom all year; students could borrow work to take home and show off to parents, but they had to return it. Team members also kept work that students might need for their portfolios. The watchwords for both students and teachers became "Never throw anything away."

Knowing How to Reflect on Your Work: Learning from Chad

Early in September of the second year, I refined the reflection process. The students and I spent one entire class brainstorming a list of questions that students could use to look at their own work reflectively. The students kept the list in their portfolios throughout the year:

- How did you grow as a writer?
- What was hard? Easy?
- What did you enjoy the most? The least?
- Why and how did you make the changes you made in this piece?
- Looking at this piece now, what would you change?
- What piece would you do over and why?

Remembering the Process for Each Document: Learning from Ben

Every six or eight weeks, we had two or three "portfolio days" devoted to finding writing pieces and doing mini-assessments on them. On these portfolio days, students took index cards, jotted responses to some of the reflection questions, and stapled the cards to their work.

By the end of the year, in May, when I assigned students the formal evaluation letter, they were really ready to look at their work. Their portfolio collection included work in all subjects. Their notations on index cards helped them remember the process and problems involved with each piece. They had pieces they loved and pieces they hated. They could learn from both their successes and their failures. Particularly, students seemed aware of the forms and subject matter that led to their best writing.

> *So far, poetry has been the best outlet for my real emotions. Poetry has helped me grow as a writer very much. . . . I do my best writing when I have strong feelings—especially negative feelings—about my subject. Most other kinds of writing are about a topic or assignment that is given to you. Teachers can't really tell you what to write about in a poem. Poetry comes from the heart; no research is needed. —Graham*

> *I do best in big projects, like the Civil War Project, because I am good at organizing things over a long period of time. It's the essays that I stink at because I can't get organized that fast. Maybe I need to give myself more time to outline or something. —Ellen*

However, one reflection question students consistently avoided: "How have you grown as a writer?" Those who tried to answer had little notion of how to respond. There were a great many "My grades got better" (or worse) and "I did more things this year." A couple of sentences in Brandon's reflection gave a clue as to why this was happening:

> *I can never figure out the categories we have to choose for this letter. I didn't really know how to write it.*
> *—Brandon*

So even though we had developed the prompts to help students reflect, the concept of "growing" as a writer was still difficult for them to grasp.

Year Three

How to Write the Letter: Learning from Brandon

I reasoned that if students were to analyze their growth as writers they would need to keep the evidence of this growth as it was occurring. I began by insisting that students save all drafts and prewriting to turn in with final copies. Their ever-growing portfolios now contained work in all stages of progress to help them trace their change and growth. I also asked students to write a letter at the beginning of the year as well as at the end—another demonstration of growth.

This early letter had four requirements: a short autobiography of their writing habits and projects, a paragraph on their strengths and weaknesses as writers, their goals in writing for the year, and their comments on the curriculum, a copy of which had been posted on the wall. These letters were written in tones that reflected anticipation as well as some dread:

> *I can't wait to get to the science fiction unit. I heard about how great it was from last year's class, and I have already started my story. —Erika*

> *I have no idea what a writing workshop is but I hope it's not poetry. I can never seem to relate to poems let alone write them! —Laura*

Now in the third year of my portfolio immersion, I began to realize that some of the problems students were having with reflection came from the fact that I was allowing them to skim the surface. For instance, some would state their reasons for choosing a particular piece and let it go at that, without analyzing those reasons. So during one class, just before students began writing their letters, I modeled the process for them by writing reflective comments on my own work. Choosing three questions from our list, I wrote my thoughts on an overhead projector so students could comment on the results as they saw them unfold. The students were all too happy to evaluate my writing. My first draft reflection read:

> *I chose this piece because I was struck by three things. First, and most importantly, I chose nonfiction. Second, writing is for me an exercise in memory; and lastly, I really love my piece. —Me*

The students enjoyed telling me that this paragraph was really ineffective. They had me rewrite it several times so that it began to look much different:

> *As I gathered work for this portfolio I looked at this poem that was a big hit with the students. I realized how much I loved writing nonfiction because it was an exercise in memory. I found myself remembering my father all over again as I wrote about our Saturday nights together. "Daddy's Saturday Nights" is my first portfolio choice because it made me cry. I revised it four times and it changed dramatically as it went through these revisions. —Me*

However, both the students and I remained dissatisfied with this still-sketchy analysis. As students continued to probe the reason I liked this piece so much, I found I could best respond by quoting the work.

> *"He came in with the apron in a bag—ready for the wash—and with fatigue pulling at the corners of his mouth and eyes, making his steps drag and his body loose with the kind of*

> *tiredness that numbs." This image of my dad just seemed to flow out of my pen while I was writing this piece and I felt like he was here again. Maybe that's why I love nonfiction writing so much. —Me*

Once I modeled the technique of referring to the text, students had no trouble using this device in their own letters.

> *I loved my short story written for Writers' Workshop. "People always left David alone because he pushed them away. He did this because he was plagued by his own gift. David saw right through himself not liking what he saw. David masked himself under many layers of false identities. Not knowing where the real him was anymore, David stopped trying to find himself." That was one of my favorite parts. I chose this because it shows what some people are really like: they don't (know) what is the real them. —Alissa*

> *The descriptive elements, such as similes and metaphors in this observational essay make the event come alive. However, my favorite line of this essay is when I said, "She had black hair French braided down the middle of her head and was waiting impatiently for the show to start like a small kindergartener waiting for her milk." This piece of writing intrigues me every time I read it, which makes this one of my best pieces. —Bess*

During this third year in May, I gave students the assessment rubric (figure2) before they started their letters. They evaluated their work using the rubric, and then I evaluated the work on the same sheet of paper they used: side-by-side evaluations. I found that if they evaluated their work first, they found things they had overlooked and changed them before they turned in the final copy. I also set aside time for them to use the rubric in class two days prior to the letter due date so that it would be done thoughtfully. They often worked in teams to revise their work, and some comments from these peer reviews made students revise their letters so that their work was more thoughtful and exceeded the standard. Some sample peer comments:

> *This paragraph doesn't answer questions—for example, 'How did you grow?'*
>
> *Tell what the writing is, and explain by using the text.*
>
> *Put in what you accomplished this year and what you didn't as your second-to-last paragraph.*

This year, in contrast to former years, students had more tools to help them reflect on their work. They took out their September letters as examples of their own process of growth and change and as the rubric by which they would be assessed. Then they worked in groups to edit their letters prior to handing them in.

Students were reflecting on their work and discovering new things about it and themselves in a way they had not been doing in earlier years. Some of their reflections and the works they refer to are amazingly insightful, even poetic:

> *Another piece that I really enjoyed writing and probably out of all the works I have created was the one that meant the most to me was "Sunset." I remembered taking walks on the*

Call for manuscripts

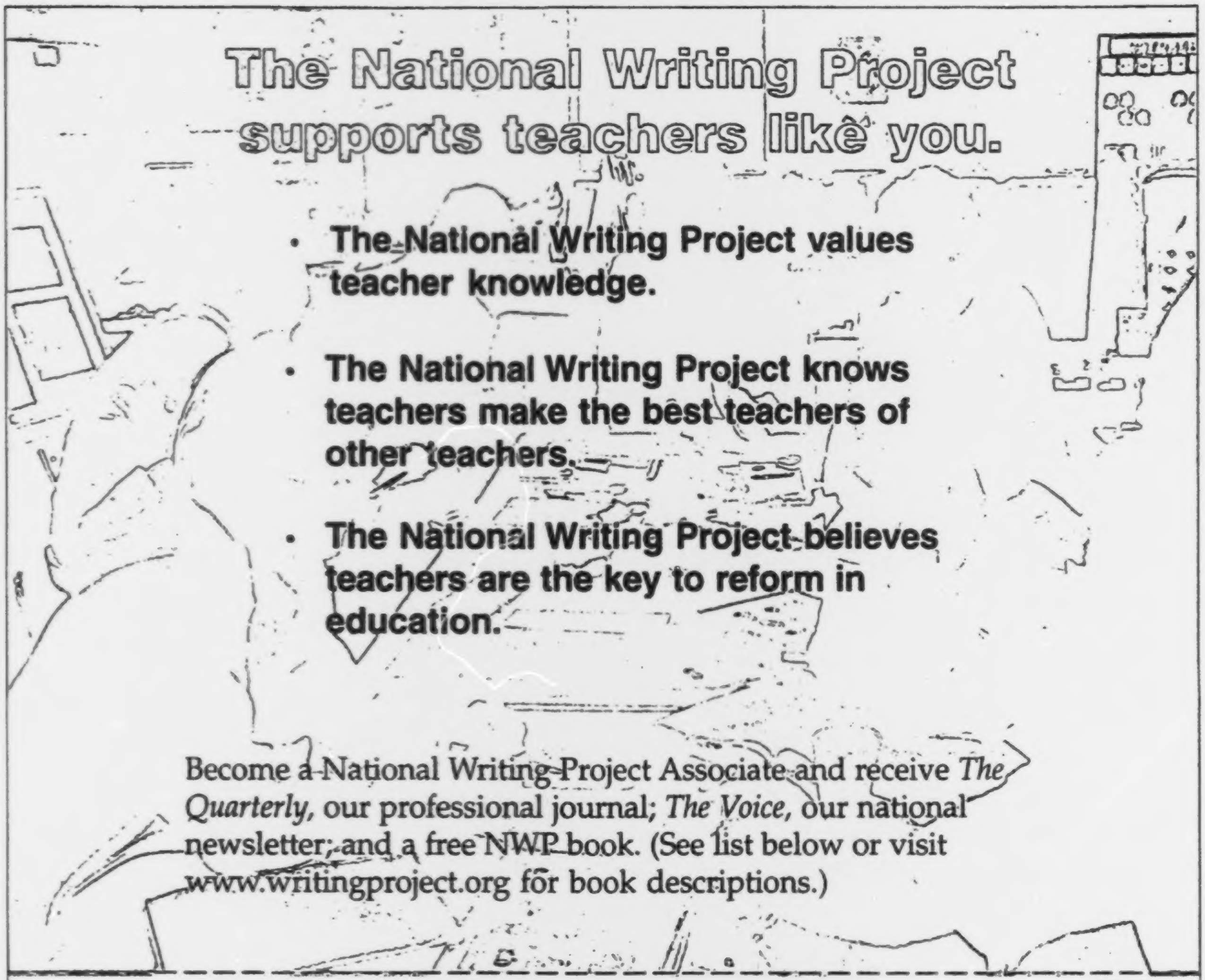
Writing About the Unfamiliar

The Winter 2002 issue of *The Quarterly* will feature writing that fits the theme "Writing About the Unfamiliar." Through this theme, we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature; the students' explorations inspired their writing.

Writing covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors, however. "Writing About the Unfamiliar" may grow out of a workshop experimenting with different writing genres, a writer investigating a challenging subject matter, or even an exploration of the familiar with eyes that are trying to see more. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn about the techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception and reflection.

Articles to be considered for this special issue must be received by November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org or mail them to:

Editors, *The Quarterly*
National Writing Project
University of California
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042



The National Writing Project supports teachers like you.

- **The National Writing Project values teacher knowledge.**
- **The National Writing Project knows teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.**
- **The National Writing Project believes teachers are the key to reform in education.**

Become a National Writing Project Associate and receive *The Quarterly,* our professional journal; *The Voice,* our national newsletter; and a free NWP book. (See list below or visit www.writingproject.org for book descriptions.)

QF01

Please put me on your mailing list to receive *The Quarterly*, *The Voice*, and a free NWP book.

Here's how to reach me:

Name ____________________

Address ____________________

City/State/Zip ____________________

Phone ____________________

Email ____________________

Here's my payment:

☐ $20 (a year of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* and a free book)

☐ $50 (3 years of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* and a free book)

Local Writing Project ____________________

☐ Check ☐ VISA ☐ MC Account # ☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐-☐☐☐☐

Exp. Date __________ Signature ____________________

My free book: ☐Whole Story ☐Teachers at the Center ☐Teacher-Researchers at Work ☐Writer's Workout Book ☐I Can Write What's on My Mind ☐Poem for Every Student ☐Writing Your Heritage ☐Cityscapes

Mail this form with your check to National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042; or fax this form with credit card payment to (510) 642-4545.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> *beach in the late afternoon when the sun was just getting ready to sink beneath the waves. I remembered watching as the colors mixed and changed into a heavenly daze as the sun dug into the horizon. I remembered watching for the green flash of light that would fan out across the horizon in a final moment of glory as if to say farewell before it dove into the quiet waters of the Gulf.*
>
> ***Sunset***
> *Sunset is beautiful. Rich and enchanting. Parading across the sky. The colors ripple across with deep motion, digging into the bottom of your soul and finding your old favorite memories.*
>
> *Then as the(y) slide into the ocean, dripping wet they drown into a pool of blue. The finale is about to begin as the last delicate stroke of fine color slips into the sea.*
> *—Paul*

> *I know for a fact that this will be a powerful letter because I usually keep personal things to myself and the first letter I wrote was not that personal and this time I am going to get personal. The pieces I have chosen are works that help people know how I see the world and how I see myself.*
> *—Martin*

Students reported growth not only in the way they were coming to know about and use rhetorical tools but also in their willingness to open up to topics, forms, and audiences they would not always have been willing or able to approach:

> *The piece that speaks my true voice is the poem "Hate" because it was a combination of what I had seen in real life, on television, and what I was thinking about. . . . Sometimes I even start to cry for no reason at all because I am thinking about something related to hate. I like that I finally wrote how I feel about this topic and that I can share my feelings without being criticized. . . . This piece defines my contribution to the genre by showing that you can write anything in poetry.*
> *—Dean*

> *I don't think I have to introduce myself, I did that in September. I'm the one who can never meet a deadline, I can't spell, and I always had trouble getting things formatted from my computer to the ones at school. Death to Macs! Somehow I actually met my goals for the year. I got at least two things in the Lit Mag, I won a contest, and I found my true voice! —Susan*

And many students were able to step back and take the long view of where they once were as writers and where they are now.

> *Frankly I think that over the past two years, I have become a writer. The fall of seventh grade I came in having no idea how to write a good essay, short story or term paper. I felt that I was required to write what I thought you would like. As I wrote more and more, I learned to be creative, to write from my heart and take my chance.*
> *—Chris*

> *I used to get scared when you gave us writers workshop. I never had any ideas at the beginning of the year. I*

Rubric for Portfolio Assessment

_____	10	Does the reader of the portfolio get a sense of how you have changed as a writer?
_____	10	Does the reader understand why you chose each piece?
_____	10	Does the portfolio explain what you have learned about yourself as a writer?
_____	10	Has your portfolio been shared with someone else for a response?
_____	10	Is the form correct?
_____	10	Is the writing clear and error free?
_____	10	Is the reflection honest and does your voice come through?
_____	10	Neatness
_____	10	Completeness
_____	10	On time
_____	**100**	**Total**

Reprinted from *The Portfolio As a Learning Strategy* by Porter and Cleland. Copyright © 1995. Published by Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc., Portsmouth, NH. All rights reserved.

Figure 2

> *even thought poetry was my favorite kind of writing because it seemed so easy. Now, I've grown as a writer and realize that I am a short story kind of gal, especially sci-fi. —Amy*

Reflecting on my own growth as a teacher, at the end of three years, I could hold up pieces such as these as evidence that my students were now much more enthusiastic participants in the portfolio process. However, as anyone who has taught may have anticipated, there were still rumbles of discontent—mostly about grades:

> *At the start of every school year, I try my hardest to do an excellent job on every paper to give teachers the idea that I have excellent work habits. But for some reason this year I am getting the lowest grades I have ever received in my whole school career. I hate portfolio days because I have to look at all those bad grades. Can you help me about this? Thanks for letting me blab in this paragraph. —John*

> *Why didn't you tell me I was doing this bad? I would have changed. —Max*

> *I really think I am a really good poet when I am not pressured into things like due dates and that kind of stuff. So all I am saying is that I would have gotten a better grade if I had a little more time to think about things. —Christa*

Once again these critical comments inspired change for the coming year.

Year Four

What could I do about these concerns? I decided I needed a more fluid approach to grading. Students needed to be able to revise their writing to raise their grades. The biggest change was that after "portfolio days," which occurred every six to eight weeks and were devoted to finding and assessing writing pieces, students had a week for revision. Many students did not like their work or their grades and were not aware of how badly they were doing until we set aside those few days to review all their writing. They could change their grades or evaluations by redoing, rethinking, revising, or just editing their work. When I gave them this time, I found that they were happier about writing and felt more in control of their own grades and their own growth.

Every year as I make my plans, I make sure to specify times and dates for portfolio assessment and for portfolio rewrite days. I make sure that I have days and times when students can discuss their reflections with me before I evaluate the portfolios. Students experience their own voices, and I hear them in a whole new way. When I read their letters, I am often humbled and moved by what students discover about themselves and their writing.

> *I had this piece forming in my head all summer. . . . When we were assigned to write in any genre we wanted, I set out, determined to write down my story and pull it off. About one hundred revisions later, I had a garbage full of crumpled paper, a notebook damaged from being hurled across the room in frustration, and my story. While writing this letter, I learned that if I pick a creative way to do an assignment or a good topic to do it on, I will enjoy the process of writing it and the final product will be better. —Charles*

> *Throughout the year, we have accomplished writing many different types of papers. But I believe that my best and most effective piece of writing was at the beginning of the year, which was about my grandmother living with me and later her stay at the hospital. The reason why this was effective was that it brought out feelings about that time that I had never expressed. . . . I learned that if you have experienced something, you can write about it and make it seem more real. For example, the descriptions of my grandmother were good because I could see her in my mind so clearly, and it was therefore easy to write an accurate description. Also, because I was writing about my grandmother, I made an extra effort to make this paper good. It was almost as if I was writing a memorial to her, and I wanted her to be proud of me. . . . Writing this piece made me feel like a real author. —Daniel*

In the three years since its inception, portfolio assessment in May has become my favorite time of the school year because during the two weeks this process takes, students talk to me on a level that amazes both me and them. They enjoy the process of choosing work for reflection, and they are able to see things in their work and their writing that I missed and they missed the first time around. Most wonderful, they see their own growth as writers, as students, as people, and they realize that education is a journey. They learn that reflection matters.

JUDITH RUHANA recently left teaching language arts at the middle school level to become the chair of the English department of Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois. She continues her contact with the Chicago Area Writing Project and has begun to write a novel—as all English teachers are inclined to do—titled *The Bone China Luncheons.*

A Place for Talk in a Writers' Workshop

ERIN (PIRNOT) CICCONE

Fifth grade teacher Erin Ciccone discovers the truth about her classroom's "Monday-morning gab sessions" when, amid student protests, she tries to replace the sessions with "serious work." Reevaluating, Ciccone comes to realize that these "gab sessions" are actually sessions of prewriting, planning, and thinking—all necessary components of strong writing.

I find that my students are my best teachers. Over the last three years, they have taught me a great deal. However, one lesson has come through loud and clear: students need to talk before they write. Although I found this idea revolutionary, Lucy Calkins has been writing about talking and listening for years. In her book *Living Between the Lines* (1991), she says that shared stories hold classrooms of writers together. Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher, and Barry Lane have all written about the importance of storytelling. I stumbled upon the truth of this last year when my fifth-graders showed me how necessary it was for them to talk before attempting to write.

Time Wasted: Talking with My Students

In the past, on Monday mornings, my classroom—usually full of energy—was sleepy. Our schedule demanded that writing be taught first thing, but my students were not ready to write and, truthfully, I was not yet ready to teach a minilesson. So I would close the door, and we would talk. It became our classroom tradition. The first thirty minutes of the week were devoted to large-group talking and listening. The topics usually were weekends, families, pets, and friends. I enjoyed this time immensely because I got to know my students. I felt guilty, however, about stealing valuable writing time to have our chats.

As the months wore on, I felt as though I were falling behind in my curriculum. I decided to sacrifice the Monday morning gab sessions. So one Monday morning, I simply began a minilesson. My students were not pleased. They begged to tell a weekend story. "Just one," they pleaded, but I refused. I conferenced with them that week as usual, but it was not a good week for writing in our room. One student, Tiffany, summed up the situation nicely when she complained in a letter to me that she had writer's block and that everything seemed wrong because no one had told stories on Monday. After talking with the class, we decided to reinstate Monday talks. I agreed but put some structure into the sessions. I did not view this time as writing time, but rather as time necessary to maintain a positive classroom community. Although we were building a safe, comfortable classroom environment, I never realized that this was, indeed, writing time.

A New Model for Morning Chat: Headline News

The new structure took on a name, Headline News. As students entered the classroom on Monday mornings, they wrote personal headlines about their weekends. The rules were that the students had to have the headlines posted on sentence strips on the bulletin board before the day started. The headlines had to not only be true but also creatively written. As attendance and lunch count drew to a close, the class began to buzz about what they knew was soon to come. Some students would read the headlines and guess the stories behind them, while others would rehearse what they wanted to share with the class, with headlines such as, "Stranded at the Movie

Theater" or "Responsibility: I'm a Mother's Helper."

I would often share. One week my headline was about a weekend trip. It read, "Doylestown Woman Lost in New Jersey, Sustains Self on Tootsie Pops." It was not a newsworthy story, but my students hung on my every word as I told about the bag of Tootsie Pops and the adventure of being so lost that even a McDonald's could not be found for dinner. Most of the fifth-graders were excited about hearing tales of my life outside of room N-3, but I noticed that a few students were writing down ideas and thoughts as I talked. Next, another student shared and then another and another. We heard a story for each headline on the bulletin board, and each time there were some questions and more students jotting down ideas.

Writers' workshop followed; the weeks ran smoothly. I praised my class for the strong voice I heard in their writers' workshop pieces. I bragged to fellow teachers about the ease with which my students found topics in their lives for writing, and I rewarded organized, focused papers with sixes on the old holistic rubric.

It was not until I began reading about teaching writing that I realized that those morning gab sessions were responsible for this excellent writing. Whereas I thought we were "stealing" writing time to talk, we were really practicing the art of storytelling. We were prewriting, planning, and thinking. There was no drafting on those Monday mornings, but we did most definitely practice an integral part of the writing process. Because of those sessions, student writing was better organized, contained more distinct focus, had stronger voice, and, best of all, had my students thinking like writers.

Thinking Like a Writer: Topic Selection

In *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* (1996), Ralph Fletcher addresses the problem that students face with topic selection. He says there is something to write about everywhere. Finding a topic is simply a matter of learning to live like a writer.

> *Writers are like other people except for at least one important difference. Other people have daily thoughts and feelings, notice this sky or that smell, but they don't do much about it. All those thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions pass through them like the air they breathe. Not writers. Writers record those things.*

My students began to record thoughts, feelings, sensations, and opinions in their memories to share on Monday mornings.

Initially, I heard a great deal about soccer championships and new pets, but as the year progressed, other things—the things that make great writing—found their way into the headlines and then into our writing. About the same time, I began modeling the idea of looking for the small things in our lives and thinking like an author. One Monday, I shared a headline about wearing a backpack. I talked about using the backpack on a hike, but I spent the bulk of the time describing the feeling of the backpack and talking about my mind flashing back to college, camp counseling, and then high school and elementary school—all times when I wore a backpack. I called wearing my backpack a personal joy.

The following week, Will shared a headline about a spaghetti dinner: "A Tribute to the Person Who Invented Spaghetti." He called spaghetti his personal joy. The precedent had been set: small headlines could make great stories. Soon we had headlines about the way cats look when they are scared and shiny wood floors in relatives' houses. Rarely did I hear students complain, "I have nothing to write about." Instead, we learned that we can find things to write about in just about anything: "How to Fake a Stomachache"; "An Entire Weekend of Avoiding Chores."

From Spoken Story to Written Tale: Voice

Pieces conceived during Headline News almost always showed a strong voice. This is not surprising given that students were allowed to actually speak the story before they wrote about it. What I did find surprising is that each student found his or her unique voice. Ralph Fletcher in *What a Writer Needs* (1993), Donald Graves in *Discover Your Own Literacy* (1991), Barry Lane in *After the End: Teaching and Learning Creative Revision* (1993) all address finding student voice. Keeping writers' notebooks and listening to storytelling are suggested methods, and both are worthy practices, but the most effective method for capturing the elusive student voice is to let the students use their voices, literally, to tell stories before they write them. When students talk, they must find their voices in order to tell the story, and those voices find their way into writing, as well.

Sustaining the Audience's Attention: Focus and Organization

Because we limited the amount of time for which each student was allowed to share (a maximum of about three minutes), students were forced to evaluate their stories and decide what was important and what was not important. Out of necessity, the pieces became focused. I developed minilessons specifically about focus, but most students had already thought about the concept before we ever called it focus. They were interested in listening to stories that had a point and stuck to the topic in the headline. This came naturally out of talking.

Organization also became important as listeners became more demanding. When a story was initially told, the storyteller would be interrupted to clarify or to include important facts. Suspense and purposeful ambiguity were born when storytellers tried to make their stories a little different from the others. The order in which the story was told was critical. To further assist in organizing writing, students had the benefit of thinking about the story for an entire day before they had to write it down. During this time, students slowly organized the pieces.

Our Headline News sessions—those thirty-minute gatherings every Monday morning—became the most valuable minutes of writing all week. As I read articles and books about writing, I see talking addressed repeatedly. It is akin to reading, writing, and listening. I will no longer feel guilty about using writing time for storytelling. As Lucy Calkins explains, storytelling is valuable. "Writers need this sense of fullness, of readiness to write, of responsiveness," she writes. "It can come from storytelling, it can come from shared responses to literature. . . . However it comes, it's terribly important" (1991).

References

Calkins, Lucy. 1991. *Living Between the Lines.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fletcher, Ralph. 1993. *What a Writer Needs.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

______. 1996. *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You.* New York: Avon Books.

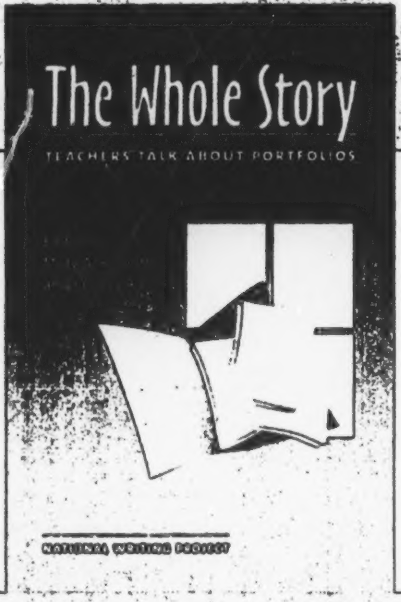
Graves, Donald. 1991. *Discover Your Own Literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Lane, Barry. 1993. *After the End: Teaching and Learning Creative Revision.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

ERIN (PIRNOT) CICCONE is a teacher-consultant with the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project. She teaches fourth grade at Park Road Elementary in Pittsford, New York.

This article, reprinted with permission, originally appeared in *The Pennsylvania Writing & Literature Project Newsletter 21* (2), Fall 2000.

NEW. . . from NWP books



The Whole Story
Teachers Talk About Portfolios

EDITED BY MARY ANN SMITH AND JANE JUSKA

A collection of essays by teachers about using writing portfolios in the classroom

What happens when students are allowed to tell the whole story about their learning—when their accomplishments are not defined solely by a standardized test? In *The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios*, eleven teachers describe the advantages and complexities of using portfolios as a way to evaluate and promote student achievement. Each author offers a compelling look at how students learn to reflect on their work and make judgments about quality. At the same time, the teachers must make judgments about how well the portfolio system is working.

Order your copy from the National Writing Project today!
Phone (510) 642-0963 or order using the online form at www.writingproject.org.

Beyond Rhetoric

A Reflective, Persuasive Final Exam for the Workshop Classroom

SARAH LORENZ

I suspect many teachers who have embraced the workshop model in their secondary classrooms often wrap up a wonderful semester with great student portfolios, but then, as I do, run straight into a school requirement for an exam at the end of the term. For me, the traditional end-of-term exam was at odds with the workshop experience.

It's five o'clock. I stagger through the front door carrying the mail, my lunch box, my schoolbag, seemingly loaded with bricks. It's the end of a crazy exam day; grades are due tomorrow. I leaf through the mail, check the messages, talk to the cats, pour a drink, get comfy on the couch, and plow into the exams my sophomore and junior English students have just turned in. But this year, there's a difference: Unlike previous years when I approached this experience with a combination of dread and foreboding, this year I can't wait to find out what my students have to say.

Believe me, it hasn't always been that way. Exams haven't always been high on my list of compelling reading material. In fact, this entire end-of-semester experience was often depressing. The problem was that I didn't know how to give an exam that was consistent with what I had been doing all year with my writing and reading workshop classes. I tried out some alternatives, creating objective tests over writing craft, asking students to report on authors they had read. But techniques such as these did not seem to mesh with what we had been doing. What I wanted was a final exam that served as a reflective review of the year, one that showed me what the students had learned.

I suspect many teachers who have embraced the workshop model in their secondary classrooms often wrap up a wonderful semester with great student portfolios, but then, as I do, run straight into a school requirement for an exam at the end of the term. For me, the traditional end-of-term exam was at odds with the workshop experience.

It was one of my Eastern Michigan Writing Project colleagues, Michelle McLemore, who helped me find a way out of this dilemma. Michelle has her students do a "detective story" exam in which they bring "evidence" of good writing in their work and present it to her in a conference. I decided to take this idea in another direction.

Now, I ask my students to write a persuasive essay that tells me what grade they think they should get and then convince me that they deserve it. They must wax eloquent about how much they have learned from the class. They can pull from anything that we have done during the semester or year. The key to convincing me is the use of detail. They can't simply say they improved as a writer—they have to give examples and even quote their own writing. They can't just say their vocabulary improved—they have to use some of their favorite new words. And they can't just say something was helpful—they have to tell me why they thought it was important, how their thinking changed, or how they applied it in everyday life.

I give them a list similar to the one below to evoke ideas.

Write about:

- *favorite books you've read during the year and why you liked them*
- *poems that have led you to deeper understandings*

- *how your writing improved, with specific examples*
- *new words you've acquired*
- *concepts or genres you've learned about*
- *editing skills you've mastered*
- *minilessons you've thought were useful*
- *writing prompts and revision techniques you particularly liked*
- *reading and writing habits you have developed or changed*
- *what you've learned from the class overall.*

Since we have not worked with the persuasive genre before, I work with the students to help them provide supporting details and examples to make their pieces convincing. As these students will have many more experiences with persuasive writing, this topic so closely connected to them, one with a very real purpose, seems like an ideal introduction to the genre.

I ask the students to tell me the grade they think they deserve and tell me why they think they should receive it. The first inclination of many students is, of course, to butter me up, to place at the center of their piece a thesis testifying to how great the class was, how great I am, how much they loved everything. Flattered as I may be by these testimonials, I won't really be convinced of students' growth until I see evidence of their learning—examples from their own writing, thinking, and living. This use of specific, supporting detail is difficult for students, and many write unreflective essays that simply repeat what I've told them during the year. Some essays are all rhetoric and no substance, or, on the other end, occasionally give a bare list of topics with no persuasive appeal. For instance, one student wrote: "I also learned that many things can effect the quality of the poem. A few of these things are line breaks, shape of the poem, tone, fresh use of language, and literary devices."

While responses of this sort tell me the student was able to remember or refer to notes we used in our poetry study, they don't show if those devices were ever used personally. And tempting as it may be, I cannot allow a strong voice punctuated by humor to dissuade me from my insistence on specific examples.

> *To move on to my next term, let's see if you know what a foot is, no I don't mean the thing connected to your ankle. It's the smallest repeated pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poetic line. Believe it or not this is a very helpful hint to remember.*

Though essays heavy with this kind of writing are not exactly what I'm looking for, I'm not gravely disappointed in them either. They do show evidence of learning. But they don't get the highest grades.

I'm learning to better teach students to work in this way by providing them with models and specific instruction. I ask students to tell little stories of how they made a connection in real life with something they learned in class. One student told how she felt a little surge of pride when she was the only one in her family to know the answer to a *Jeopardy* question about literature. Another wrote of how she knew exactly how to answer the question on the ACT about genre because we had talked about the concept so often. And there were students who made larger connections between what we had learned and their own lives:

> *One of the authors that you read from said something along the lines of "being aware of details, don't forget to live," this has helped me to notice things in a different way. I remember flipping through a magazine a few days ago and looking at a few pictures and thinking about what great poems could be made out of them. Even when we were in Washington, D.C., I saw people and could think of how they might be feeling and why and create a poem in my mind. Such as when I saw an elderly woman standing in front of Robert E. Lee's house in Arlington I would find myself thinking of her "overlooking the solemnly quiet cemetery. All the white blurring together in a bare blanket of glory for the deserving soldiers. Her eyes were remorseful, as if she had lost something and didn't think to regret it until it was too late. She was standing there alone, but not lonely. She had stopped being lonely." It was sad to think of, but was an amazing moment for me, to be able to see someone and make up a past and be able to remember it. —Stephanie*

Of course, topics on which we had spent the most time in class come up frequently in the essays. This past year, my sophomores and juniors did a genre study on poetry that lasted most of second semester, so they wrote a lot about poetry in their essays, telling how their perspectives on poetry had changed and giving examples from their own work. Krist said, "You showed us that poetry isn't all common sense, it's our dreams gone wild." He quoted from his response to a dream-write where he used alliteration inspired by a *National Geographic* picture: "Monkeys—hairy furry flamboyant hanging on powerful power lines with a sunset that's powdery pink."

Students spent a lot of time revising their poetry, putting to work poetic devices. Camelle referred to her inclusion of metaphors in a revision of her first poem:

> *The volleyball flew over the net. There's really nothing much to read into—so let's compare it to something descriptive: The volleyball flew over the net like an asteroid flies through space. Doesn't that sound much more descriptive? It gives life and meaning to your statement.*

Trae cleverly demonstrated his understanding of figurative language by incorporating an example of these devices right into his sentence:

> *Using similes and metaphors is like breathing to me.... I have noticed a great difference in my writing and so have my parents. They can tell the difference because when they read my poems they asked me did I copy them from somewhere....*

Other responses, while not rich in content, were startling in their level of understanding. Melissa talked about our Socratic Seminar discussions of poetry, which were difficult for her to jump into even though she saw the value. "Some of the poems you had us decipher were tough," she said, "but I think we did a good job of digging in to dead people's souls and finding out their deep, dark secrets."

One of the best features of this project has been the way it clarifies the use of minilessons in my classroom. My lesson on the use of the thesaurus, for instance, had made an impact in ways I had not anticipated. Students wrote about learning new words and using the thesaurus, and they commented on some of the extra advice I included in the minilesson as well as how their new skills made them feel. Dylan wrote, "Words like *skinny* and *dull* are now replaced with *gaunt* and *somber.* I kind of like how these words enhance my profile from an intellectual perspective."

Camille said:

> *But Mrs. Lorenz did tell us to make sure that we don't use the thesaurus as a way to use big words and confound everyone, but to use rich words. Like instead of saying* fast, *you could say* abruptly. Abruptly *sounds better and it doesn't confound anyone."*

Some minilessons were very short and focused on practical matters of usage or common errors. "I learned a ton of stuff this year. I even learned that *a lot* is two words," wrote Sean. The very practical lessons, things I never used to even recognize as content but just as stuff I'd throw in for "free" were now recorded as minilessons, and this helped us recognize their value.

Many students referred to a minilesson I'd given on writing sympathy notes as one of the best, which was a real surprise to me. Students talked about terms that we learned: "I had never heard of a line break before February twenty-third two thousand and one," said Chris, and Aaron revealed some interesting wordplay that had been going on inside his head:

> *An outstandingly helpful minilesson was #9, which talked about repetition and personification. After learning about these techniques, I created my own tool, Personificaucasian, which gives Caucasian-like characteristics to an animal, object, or concept.*

Who ever finds material like this on a multiple-choice exam?

Writing-craft lessons came up in the essays. We had had many minilessons on the use of specific detail, so I was gratified to find many students mentioning it in their essays.

> *Now, when I write something, I don't just say the room was dark. I would describe the eerie glow it had about it, the dancing shadows on the walls and the creeping feeling of doom all around me. —Nate*

> *Instead of telling the reader that you're eating fruit, tell the reader that the juice from the oversized pomegranate was dribbling down your chin.—Stephanie.*

> *For example, don't say your "car." Say something like "my gleaming red hot rod convertible." —Chris*

> *You can never use too much detail. Details are the insides of the story. Without them, we would all be lost. Be specific. Instead of saying "there was a pretty flower by the windowsill' say "there was a radiant geranium sitting on the windowsill's left." Now you know what kind of flower it is, where it is, and what kind of "pretty" it was. —Beckie*

Beckie provides here the kind of example that I try to share with other students. She develops the concept not only with an example, but goes on to analyze the reasons for using detail.

Students talked about books they had read during independent reading, an area of learning I had never even tried to assess on the final exam. While many of these comments tended to be more general than I would have preferred, they did give me a clear idea of the variety of learning that was taking place during independent reading time. Nate admitted, "*Slot Machine* was the first book that I have ever laughed out loud while reading." Andy revealed that he had read over seven hundred hours this year. And Alex, who avoided reading at all costs in the past, wrote how he had changed:

> *I figured out what kind of book I like to read. I like to read factual books and I would have never found out about that if it weren't for you. . . . After all that reading, my imagination, once a non-existent part of my life, started to unfold. My concentration level grew after that, and I started using the right side of my brain.*

Other students wrote in convincing detail about what they had taken away from our writing conferences:

> *You were looking at one of my poems that had no feeling or thought behind it. Then you brought up Emily Dickinson and how she only hints at something else for the reader to find. It's really incredible how she does that, so I went and read a few of her poems. It took awhile to digest them and go over them again to figure out. But once I figured out one or two of them, I realized what you were talking about. I then thought about how amazing it would be to have people reading those kind of poems, making them sit down and try and get into your mind, your innermost thought, and why you wrote that. I know I'll never be Emily Dickinson, or even close to it. But that really inspired me, and gave me something to work towards. And I want to thank you for that.*

Elsewhere in the essay, she reflected on her writing process:

> *Emily Dickinson wrote, "The Brain, within its groove / Runs evenly and true; / But let a splinter swerve / 'Twere easier for you / To put the water back / When floods have slit the hills . . ." I feel like this is me, when I get distracted.*
> *—Stephanie*

Laying on my couch, beaming idiotically, I feel like maybe I am doing something right after all.

As my students have worked with this end-of-the-term persuasive essay format, the benefits to them have become increasingly clear. But I also benefit. I often would come to the end of the semester wondering despairingly, "What did we accomplish?" I would create new lessons based on errors I saw in students' writing or on topics that arose serendipitously, so it didn't always feel like I'd covered a lot of weighty topics in depth. Some minilessons are so short and focused—like the use of *a lot* or the thesaurus—that I frequently have felt as if my direct instruction was haphazard and random. This is not as much of a problem now. As I've introduced the persuasive essay final, I've also required students to record all minilessons in a special section in their learning logs, and this is one of the main sources they draw from when they write their persuasive papers. It helps them take minilessons more seriously during the year, and it offers a substantial review, which is the purpose of an exam. Further, students and teacher alike realize that we really did cover a lot during the year. It's great to go from wondering, "What did we spend all our time on this year?" to thinking, "Wow—we really did cover a lot of ground."

This project has other benefits. It provides a way of thinking about language arts skills that gives a bigger picture than the reflective piece typically included in portfolios. Portfolio reflections still have a place, of course, but they are highly focused on the pieces included in the portfolio and don't usually address the class as a whole. Reflection of any kind is often difficult for students, and teachers' demands for reflection on portfolio entries can be vague and frustrating. While the persuasive essay is also reflective, it has a very direct and business-like purpose and audience—it's for me, and it's for a big grade. That may not seem very kind and gentle, but it's honest, and it sure gets great results.

The review is also valuable because the students think about how much they have learned and grown in the workshop format. Because workshop is different from traditional teacher-directed classes and is very student centered, kids sometimes don't realize that they are learning or even doing work. Nate said, "The methods of teaching were such that it gave the illusion that we were not really being taught. . . . In a way, we taught ourselves with the assistance of a teacher." Students often comment that they are surprised at how much they've gained. As Adam admitted:

> *I'm ashamed to say it but here it goes. I like writing. Yes, it's true. The student with the absolute worst attitude in the school towards anything involving ink actually enjoys putting the stuff down on paper. Especially poetry (Don't tell my friends.)*

On a practical level, this is an assignment that can be done during the exam period itself, but is better outside of class as a take-home exam. Either way, I provide students with a prewriting assignment or worksheet. In class, I go over the minilessons and other material that we have covered, and I provide models of the type of writing that is

continued on page 40

How to Build Better Engineers

A Practical Approach to the Mechanics of Text

RON E. SMELSER

A good idea remains just that until it can be turned into a product, and the transition from idea to product requires that the engineer produce clear proposals demonstrating the idea's practicality and economic feasibility. Writing is a key element in this process.

"Engineers don't need to know how to write. Why are you making us do this?"

I often hear such comments when I present my mechanical engineering students with writing assignments. I must confess that I shared these beliefs when I was myself an engineering student and a young engineer. However, having spent more than two-thirds of my professional life in industrial research, I am well educated in the realities of the engineering world. Technological skill, I tell my students, is only a part of what an engineer needs to succeed.

In my twenty-five years in the field, I spent at least 50 percent of my time writing and communicating. I wrote internal memoranda, program proposals, letters, and technical reports and papers. In addition, I was called on to organize and present technical material to program managers and directors to obtain project funding.

My experiences are not unique. When my students and I visit engineering companies, the engineers stress that, of course, engineers must understand the technology and economics of their projections, but these skills are worth very little unless they are paired with the ability to write and communicate. A good idea remains just that until it can be turned into a product, and the transition from idea to product requires that the engineer produce clear proposals demonstrating the idea's practicality and economic feasibility. Writing is a key element in this process. But how do engineers acquire writing skills?

Personally, I learned to write on the job. My education—particularly my undergraduate education—provided little writing instruction or support, and when I returned to the classroom as a professor, I was dismayed to discover that little had changed in this regard. Engineering curricula still rely extensively on the English department to teach writing. The engineering school often requires introductory composition classes, followed by a course on technical writing. While these are useful classes, they do not aim to show students the vital importance of writing skills in their profession and, by themselves, they are not nearly enough to help students develop skills for professional success.

Engineers in training may remain blissfully unaware of this deficiency, but once out in the field, they are soon conscious of this gaping hole in their preparation. In a survey of 1995 graduates from our University of Idaho College of Engineering, 40 percent of the respondents thought that more emphasis should be given to written communication, and 60 percent thought that more emphasis should be given to oral communication and presentation skills.

The engineering profession is also aware of the problem. The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) now requires engineering programs to "demonstrate that their graduates have an ability to communicate effectively and a recognition of the need for, and an ability to engage in, life-long learning." These requirements are compelling engineering schools to recognize that we need to do more to help our students become better writers.

Helping Engineers Write

So just what is wrong with the writing of engineering students? In general, part of their deficiency stems from their inclination to write like engineers, by which I mean to write like the engineering textbooks that serve as their principal models. The following example, with its long, involved sentences filled with qualifiers and clauses, is typical:

> *A surface represents the only variety of non-Euclidean manifolds capable of actual visualization, and the origin of the metrical geometry of non-Euclidean manifolds in general is found in the work of the German mathematician Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855), professor of mathematics in the University of Göttingen, in which the metrical geometry of an ordinary surface is developed from the standpoint of its intrinsic properties, whereby is meant properties which require for their specification no elements which lie outside the surface itself.*
>
> [A. P. Wills, Vector Analysis with an Introduction to Tensor Analysis, xxix, Prentice-Hall, Inc.]

One may argue that an eighty-word sentence is not all that unusual in a textbook. Engineers need to be precise, and qualification ("where by is meant . . .") is one way to achieve this precision. The problem is that when student writers pack a sentence in this way, their prose often becomes close to incomprehensible:

> *The radial stresses in this problem can be ignored because they are so small compared to the other stresses and any failure they will have already had occurred before the radial stresses would have had a chance to reach the yield point which in this case is possible because the radial stresses are not significant as the width of the cross section near the neutral axis here is not too small and relative to rest of the hook the section is large enough.*

I push my undergraduates to break up their sentences. In engineering writing, as in much other writing, two or three sentences can often more effectively do the job than one sentence that is bloated and unclear. Further, again like the writers of engineering textbooks, engineering students assume they are writing for an audience of engineers. But in the real-work world of engineering, this is not necessarily true. The fact is engineers are often writing for project managers and others with little knowledge of the language of engineering.

In order to give students a taste of what it is like to write for an audience that does not share their technical jargon, I ask students to describe how a transistor works, in language accessible to a high school student. Here is one student's effort.

> *Transistors are semiconductor devices that can control the electrical current flowing between two terminals of differing electrical potential based on a voltage applied to a third terminal called a gate. This gate voltage controls the number of free charge carriers available at the junction of two dissimilar semiconducting materials and therefore the current which flows between them.*

A good try, but the layperson is left with a bunch of questions. For instance, what are "free charge carriers"? What are "dissimilar semiconducting materials"? Many upper-division electrical engineering students would be hard-pressed to know what this author is saying.

As I have become involved with the Northwest Inland Writing Project at the University of Idaho, I have been working on other ways to help my students explain educational principles in laypersons' terms. But that has been only one aspect of my involvement with the writing project. Until recently, I treated my students' writing problems—those of the sort I have noted above, as well as many surface errors such as pronoun reference problems and errors in subject-verb agreement—by noting these deficiencies on their final documents and returning their marked papers to them. I am sure they checked their grades and then filed the papers without reading the comments or using them to improve their writing, because the next assignment would invariably contain the same errors and have the same deficiencies.

Then in the spring of 1997, I attended a writing-across-the-curriculum seminar presented by Elinor Michel, director of the Northwest Inland Writing Project. Faculty from across the university attended this week-long course, which introduced us to a variety of writing techniques. We learned about writing to learn and writing to communicate. We explored the research on writing. We heard the experiences of our peers who had introduced writing in their courses. They described techniques that worked and those that did not. We also began to develop assignments for use in our classes. This initial exposure to teaching writing was followed by a series of meetings during the fall and spring terms to hone assignments and discuss experiences with writing. The follow-up meetings provided the support I needed to implement writing in my engineering courses.

I brought away from the seminar two overarching strategies that have guided my teaching since my involvement with the project. One is the wisdom of what writing teachers call "scaffolding" and the other the power of peer review. As it turns out, both of these approaches connect to the real world of engineering writing.

Scaffolding—the process of moving through a series of ordered steps in developing a piece of writing—comes very close to the practice engineers and other professionals encounter when they generate and submit an article to a technical conference. The engineer-writer submits an abstract that receives comment from the conference organizers or journal editor. He or she writes the article, which is then sent out for peer review, and the reviewers' comments are incorporated in the final draft. This is "process writing."

In my classes, I try to replicate this process. Students first submit, along with a formal letters of submission, extended abstracts explaining the scope and nature of their intended articles. Acting as an editor, I review the letters and the abstracts and accept, reject, or request revisions. The formal submission process gives the students experience and skill in drafting both formal letters of transmittal and, in the form of a concise abstract, an outline of the intention of a proposed work. These are vital skills for survival in a workplace.

As many of my undergraduate students have had little experience with writing, technical or otherwise, I introduce them to this process in a nontechnical context. I ask them to write a paper explaining the contributions of a significant inventor. Here is a sample abstract:

> ***Adolphe Sax—Abstract***
>
> *Aldolphe Sax was born on November 6, 1814, in Dinant, Belgium. While he was growing up, he was exposed to his father's occupation of designing and building woodwind and brass instruments. From this, he learned to build and how to design instruments. This combined with his musical talents led Adolphe to modify and build a large variety of instruments with hundreds of modifications and improvements over current designs. He is also credited with the creation of the saxhorn, the saxtromba, and the saxophone. These improvements and instruments had a long-lasting impact on the design of instruments and are still evident today.*

This abstract gives me a pretty good idea of where the student is going in her paper. I would expect, for instance, that this paper would discuss in some detail some of the "hundreds of modifications . . . over current designs" that Sax had introduced. Unfortunately, not every abstract presents such a clear path. When this happens, my responsibility is clear. I ask students to revise their work. Students, in general, seem not particularly used to revising their writing, and they are particularly not used to revising their writing in an engineering class. But by demanding a retooled effort, I believe I am introducing them to real-world engineering writing.

After I accept the abstracts, each student writes a draft of the proposed article and submits it in triplicate to me. These multiple copies allow me to send the work to peer reviewers, that is, to other students; to return a copy to the author with comments; and to verify that revision is taking place during the assignment.

The peer review process gives students an opportunity to participate in a critical review of each other's work. It challenges students to evaluate the content of the document and the presentation of the material and to assess what they have learned from the document. The students are given specific guidelines to aid them in this process:

> *Prepare a short (½ to 1 page) review of the submitted article. The review should address the technical content of the article, the writing style, and the manuscript format. Suggested questions to guide your review follow:*
>
> *a) Technical content: Did the writer provide the necessary information that was described in the abstract submitted for the article? Is the article technically sound?*
>
> *b) Writing style: Is the writing style consistent with the assigned task of producing a technical article for a non-technical audience? Are the grammar and punctuation correct? Are the sentences clear? Has the author avoided jargon and excessive technical detail?*
>
> *c) Manuscript format: Has all the necessary information about the author been included? Are the parts of the article clearly delineated? Have the guidelines for preparing the manuscript been followed?*

Alas, I have found that written guidelines do not, by themselves, provide enough support to ensure a complete review process. The students tend to use the review questions as a template rather than as a stimulus to look deeply into the text they are reviewing, as the following example demonstrates.

> *Attached is a copy of the reviewed article. Using the guidelines stated in the memorandum, I evaluated the paper and found that it met the guidelines. The article was technically sound with the information that it presented. The specific inventions in the abstract were explained in the article. Some other important inventions of Watt were included in the article that were not specifically mentioned in the abstract. The writing style guidelines were also satisfied. The article presented a technical topic in a way such that a non-technical person would have little trouble understanding the information presented. A lack of jargon helped with this understanding. I found no grammar, spelling or punctuation errors in the article. This article appeared to be in the proper manuscript format. All focus changes are clearly marked in the article so that the reader can easily find the information needed...The only improvement that could be made would be to add a little more to the workings of his inventions. A brief explanation of the sun and planet gear would be interesting to many readers.*

This student reviewer has followed the formula of the guidelines by simply rewriting the guidelines with minor comments. However, some students did provide better feedback while still following the formula, as this example shows:

> *The attached paper is an excellent submission.... The paper excels in accomplishing the goal of communicating the importance of technology to a nontechnical audience. The technical content and writing style are perfectly written. Minor comments for improvement are specified for the manuscript format.*
>
> *Technical Content—The paper artfully explains important subjects from the abstract. Especially interesting are explanations of how the microscope was improved, why Royal Society was written, and how innovations influenced science.*
>
> *Writing Style—The writer has a superb ability to explain complex concepts in simple terms. An example is the excellent description of how the understanding of the fertilization process evolved.*
>
> *Manuscript Format—Highlights include an interesting title and subheadings that facilitate reading and understanding. Recommended improvements include compliance with the American Society of Mechanical Engineers standards for top, bottom, and side margins and the longest line for the title.*
>
> *In conclusion, this paper is excellent and represents a standard that other engineers should strive to achieve.*

While this reviewer offers primarily positive feedback, he does support his praise with specific examples, which demonstrates that he has carefully read the article.

However, I've received enough reviews of the former kind that I realize students need more preparation if writers are to receive truly useful peer reviews. I plan to expand the guidelines for review, incorporate an in-class activity in which students review and discuss a technical writing and develop a rubric for it.

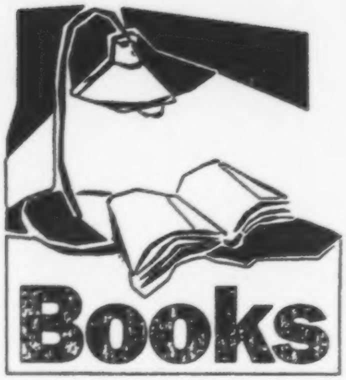
As the assignment continues, I ask the peer reviewers to submit their reviews in triplicate. I review the reviews and give comments to the reviewers to help them look critically at their colleagues' work. Authors cannot respond when a reviewer makes a general comment like "there is a problem in this paper." They can respond to a specific comment like "the facts presented in this paper are contrary to accepted interpretations." I remind reviewers to balance their criticism of content and style, respect the author, and recognize that style differs from writer to writer.

The authors receive blind copies of the reviews with a request to revise their submissions, incorporating the peer reviewers' responses. They are also given the opportunity to present reasoned rebuttals for not making suggested changes. They submit the final drafts of their articles in triplicate for editorial approval.

The revisions show the results of peer review and the sense of ownership that the students take in improving their writing. As editor, I check the articles for clarity and accuracy, revision or rebuttal, and conformance to format. I return the manuscripts to the authors once more for final revision and submission of camera-ready copies, then assemble the finished pieces into a bound booklet, which I give to the students for inclusion in a personal portfolio of their work.

Rather than tell the students in advance that their work will be compiled into a booklet, I present it to them as a reward for their effort in producing good writing. Production of the booklet gives me an opportunity

continued on page 40



Updrafts: Case Studies in Teacher Renewal

Edited by Roy F. Fox

REVIEWED BY MICHELE PITTARD

Beyond the Writers' Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction

Written by Carol Bly

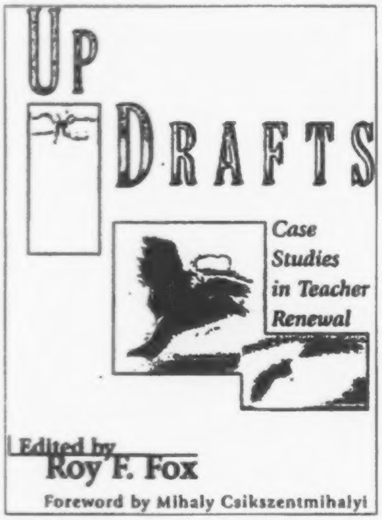
REVIEWED BY MICHEAL THOMPSON

Updrafts: Case Studies in Teacher Renewal

Edited by Roy F. Fox. National Council of Teachers of English, 2000. $28.95; 194 pages. ISBN: 0-8141-5575-8.

As its title suggests, *Updrafts: Case Studies in Teacher Renewal* promises an uplifting, refreshing account of teacher renewal. Roy Fox and his colleagues tell eight well-crafted and thoughtful stories of how experienced, successful teachers negotiated their professional and personal journeys to renewal. These case studies, firmly grounded in theory, will have schools rethinking professional development experiences. The book reaches beyond the audience of practicing teachers seeking their own renewal to appeal to administrators and teacher educators particularly concerned with problems such as the attrition of beginning teachers.

The book is the culmination of a year-long study conducted by Fox and seven other researchers, all of whom are public school and university teachers. Many of the researchers, as well as the participating teachers, are currently or were previously affiliated with the Missouri Writing Project. The case-study approach used by the researchers lends itself to an in-depth look at individual teachers working within a variety of contexts who discover renewal in what sometimes seem like unlikely places.


UP
DRAFTS
Case Studies in Teacher Renewal
Edited by
Roy F. Fox
Foreword by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

One of the book's strengths is in the rendering of the participating teachers' stories of rejuvenation. Authors Janet Alsup, Susan Baruffi, Marilyn Richardson, Marilyn Schultz, Patrick Shaw, Lucy Stanovick, Jill Weisner, and Fox construct the teachers' stories in ways that illustrate the complexities and challenges associated with the teaching profession and also provide compelling glimpses into the reality of these teachers' personal and professional lives and the tricky balance they seek to maintain between the two.

Fox casts these narratives in the framework of three concepts.

1) The *teacher's social contexts*, which "affect what we do and how we feel about it" (xxv). These contexts have a major impact on how (or if) a teacher is enabled to renew personally and professionally.

2) The dual notions of *passion and flow*. All the teachers in the study are described as passionate about teaching and working with students, and all are described having *flow experiences* during teaching. *Flow experiences*, as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his forward to the book, relate to those times when "we become deeply absorbed in challenging yet pleasurable activities" (xxxi). Fox asserts that the connection between passion and flow directly influences a teacher's renewal experiences.

3) The *development of the teacher's voice*, which Fox says "largely shapes a teacher's identity" (xxxv). These three criteria together enable teachers to take control of their careers and make sense of their own teaching and learning.

Updrafts is divided into three parts, all of which connect to the wind metaphor advanced in the title. Part 1, "Tailwinds," includes the stories of teachers whose renewal experiences come from being "blown forward" from teaching into a variety of activities related and unrelated to teaching. In the book's opening chapter, Lucy Stanovick introduces readers to one of the themes that emerges from the book—how teachers' professional and personal lives constantly overlap. In telling the story of Kate's* renewal, Stanovick explains how Kate found her voice and experienced renewal through the creative outlets of pottery and poetry.

The next two chapters introduce us to teachers who also found renewal in creative places, one in her writing and painting and the other through involvement with her school's drama productions—activities that allowed these teachers to move forward to more fulfilling lives. Then, recounting a road toward renewal with which many writing project teachers will identify, Susan Baruffi shows how Alex's involvement in the Missouri Writing Project led to her empowerment and renewal as a writing teacher, a development which in turn led to an unexpected job change.

Part 2, "Crosswinds," introduces us to teachers whose experiences with renewal have come from unexpected directions. Janet Alsup tells the story of Kim, her former teacher and colleague. For Kim, the daily routine of reflecting on her students' lives and work while doing the dishes provided a setting that allowed her to realize the unexpected direction she needed to take to rethink her practices in the classroom. Her renewal, which came through the investigation of her own cognitive processes, brought about Kim's professional growth. Alsup comments, "As Kim grew as a thinker, she grew as a teacher" (82).

In another chapter in part 2, Marilyn Richardson charts Pat's transforming renewal experiences from the time they met as graduate students to the present as colleagues teaching at the same university. In search of ways to bring her classes to life, Pat returned to graduate school where she discovered whole language theory and other ideas that resonated with her beliefs. Her immersion in these ideas provided Pat with the theoretical underpinnings she needed to introduce strategies in her physical education classes that emphasized cooperation rather then competition, a stance that reinforced her view of what education should be. Pat's story exemplifies an important premise of the book—that renewal is learning, and it often comes from unexpected sources at unexpected times, like the blowing of a crosswind.

Part 3, "Whirlwinds," describes teachers who are swept up and carried toward renewal by experiences beyond their control. Patrick Shaw introduces us to the whirlwind of Tish's experience. Tish's lesbian relationship has isolated her from her colleagues. Her personal life undergoes several traumas, but she emerges from this whirlwind strengthened as she begins to write about issues of gender and literacy. Later in part 3, Fox takes us with him as he travels across the country, family in tow, from Idaho to a new job in Missouri. His engaging, often humorous account of his whirlwind of a trip concludes with his understanding that even though he was personally connected to Idaho, his professional role there was more as an administrator than a teacher. He didn't want that. His is a journey toward renewal.

Fox's final chapter, "Toward a Model for Teacher Renewal," offers practical, specific suggestions for how schools can support teachers as they seek to renew themselves personally and professionally. Briefly, they are as follows:

1. Demystify teacher renewal.
2. Reimburse teachers for the costs of professional development.
3. Provide teachers with career/psychological counseling.
4. Provide participatory and flexible options for teacher renewal.
5. Integrate teachers' personal development with professional development.
6. Create environments that enable teachers to demonstrate their passion for content—for exploring it and communicating it.
7. Create environments that enable teachers to demonstrate how their passions connect to students' larger cultures.

While emphasizing the study's finding that renewal is often a personal and highly individual process, Fox suggests a shift in the paradigm of teaching to accommodate the needs of teachers. The implications of this book extend beyond meeting the needs of individual teachers seeking strategies for renewal. This study will no doubt also add to the current conversations regarding professional development, teacher education, and school reform.

**In accordance with the style of the book itself, teachers who served as subjects of case studies are referred to by first name only.*

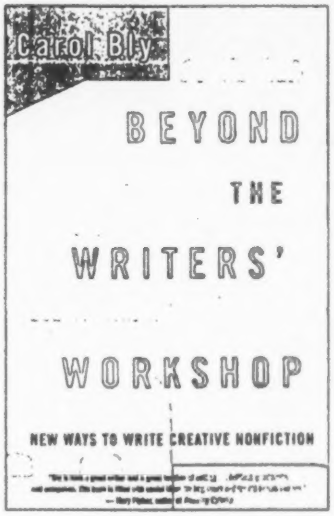
Michele Pittard teaches an undergraduate secondary literacy course and supervises English education student teachers at Purdue University in Indiana. She will earn her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in English teacher education in May 2002.

Books

Beyond the Writers' Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction

By Carol Bly. Anchor Books, 2001. $12.00; 275 pages plus appendices. ISBN 0-385-49919-1.

It didn't matter what genre our lesson plans said we were practicing with the thirty-one juniors in our fifth-period creative writing class at St. Paul's Harding High School last spring. The seven teenage moms in the class always veered toward forms of creative nonfiction. We'd assign poetry; they'd write pithy and poetic birth memoir in prose. We'd teach clever tricks for structuring short stories (aligned with our state's standards in "artistic creation and performance," of course); they'd deliver scathing essayistic denunciations of absent boyfriends. We'd ask for "show-don't-tell" descriptions of strangers on the street; they'd compose miniature word portraits of their infant sons or daughters.


Carol Bly
BEYOND THE WRITERS' WORKSHOP
NEW WAYS TO WRITE CREATIVE NONFICTION

We were slow to figure out what was happening: there was a disjunction between the ambitions of our syllabus and the writerly motivations of these young mothers. We were working toward building writers from the outside, through the application of technique as demanded by our standards and our own history as teachers. These students were working from the inside, defining life experience for themselves through writing. They wanted the class to be a place where they could follow Carol Bly's directive to "be truthful." As Bly puts it in her exuberant new book, "... be truthful, tell things in your personal voice, and have your modus operandi be revealing your own life circumstances through anecdote or narrative and revealing the meanings you attach to those circumstances" (xvii). This is Bly's definition of creative nonfiction, but it could just as well serve as a guiding principle for the teaching of creative writing in all its modes.

Beyond the Writers' Workshop is a riveting critique of educational group-think methodology and the nonreflective "psychological habitats" in which our consumer culture prefers for us to hang out. Bly takes a close look at currently popular teaching techniques that rely on the "workshopping" of students' writing, and she is not optimistic about what she sees. In many workshop situations, Bly points out, the group provides cheap advice about surface issues in the writer's piece—if the group gets even that far. The writer's attention is drawn to the top, toward technique and mechanistic "how-to" approaches. The writer is left alone to tackle the core issues of meaning that are most in need of thinking and revision. In some cases, the writer is even discouraged from delving too deeply into these central issues. The first draft needs more, she says, but it needs more from underneath, not from on top.

Bly offers more than curmudgeonly opposition to what is currently popular, however. Her writing is true to her book's title. If we want our students to dig deep into the meaning and metaphor lurking in their real lives and in their writing, we need to help them puncture the crusty permafrost of what Bly calls our "American junk culture." We need to plan our teaching so that we are helping students to "dig for the potatoes," as Barry Lane puts it in his book *Reviser's Toolbox* (1999).

Bly writes that "A shockingly large part of our job as writing teachers is to save students from the junk culture" (134). To this she adds that a teacher's purpose "is to awaken, and to give confidence to *the imagination*—imagination being the connection-making aspect of human intelligence" (51).

Bly goes on to offer an energizing and intellectually unified array of ideas for teachers who want to go beyond the writing workshop and stand up for our students against this "fascism of the simple." Chapter 2, on the three stages of writing—inspiration, spiritual deepening, and literary fixing—is packed with helpful insights for teachers, particularly as she explicates the often forgotten second stage.

The second of these stages is where the real work of writing with meaning and resonance comes, and it is where thoughtless workshop approaches are least helpful. From Bly's perspective, group critiques of early drafts too often simply direct writers to add to their inspiration. Seldom are writers asked to deepen or reexamine those inspirations. This is a deficit that goes beyond our classrooms, but can be at least partially remedied there, as Bly writes: "Most children today graduate from high school without having been asked questions about ideas ... they learn mechanical data, but they don't learn the connective principles behind those data" (4). She notes that:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> *American living rooms don't ring with talk about one's inner love of truth, or inner love of beauty, or inner love of goodness or one's inner hatred of meaninglessness or inner despair over or inner fear of cruelty. We count on . . . encouragement from elementary and high school English teachers . . . to light and to preserve our inner fires, if inner fires are to be lighted and preserved (42).*

What student writers need during this stage is not more technical advice—that is appropriate later—but courage and help in becoming "psychologically sturdy." All of us who want to write need to strive for the same in our noncomtemplative society—a society in which, as Bly notes, "the very idea of using writing as a tool to become more deeply one's own particular self sounds nutty" (xviii).

Bly is refreshingly honest and informed about the challenges public school writing teachers face, and she is not shy about stating some difficult truths. There is little more difficult work than conducting one-on-one writing conferences with students, she says. She reminds us that writers need solitude to do thoughtful work, that using small groups in writing classrooms as a way to deal with overcrowding is a fraud, and that American political leadership is negligent for not providing adequate funding so that "public school students can have the experience [of small classes] that goes on in private schools." But her argument is most compelling when she offers specific ideas and provocative philosophical frameworks for writing teachers.

Her chapter on using empathic inquiry to deepen first drafts will be tremendously helpful to teachers struggling to move their students toward meaningfulness in their writing. Empathic inquiry is a five-step process that starts with teachers and students getting serious about listening. It teaches methods of setting aside our own points of view for a time for the sake of engaging in another person's words, builds individuals' capacities to ask open-ended questions, offers explicit instruction in paraphrasing, and then springs us to "look forward and plan free spiritedly."

The chapter on how an understanding of psychologically significant stage-development theories of human ethical and intellectual growth can inform our approach to literature and writing is stunningly original, and Bly's overview of contemporary neuroscience and its implications for writers and writing teachers made me want to read more.

The first half of the book is dedicated to these kinds of overarching themes. Bly invites her readers to ride along as her writer's imagination makes connections. It's a lively, fascinating trip, a kind of unified theory of teaching creative writing, with special attention to nonfiction, that's meant to inspire us to build our own theories. It definitely encourages individual thought about some of the accepted, though often unexamined, tenets of contemporary writing pedagogy.

Bly takes a look at specific groups of writing students in the second half of the book. I found her chapters on teaching elementary, middle, and high school students especially pertinent. She's taken her "empathic inquiry" approach to heart in these sections. Her suggestions for teaching creative nonfiction to children and high school students is based on careful listening to kids and teachers and is grounded in the day-to-day realities of classroom life.

"Children should not be allowed to write about anything they see on television," she says. Not because television is all bad (though that's mostly true), but because we want our kids to practice moving into "confident reflections arising in their own minds" (149) beyond the constant bombardment of engrossing stimuli that's the lifeblood of television. She offers a progressive intellectual, ethical, and practical defense of having kids memorize stories (and, later, poetry), and she gives some forthright advice about conducting class discussions in which the speed of our kids' responses becomes less important than the content of what they have to say. In addition, her examination of the monocultures in which many of our high school students live is apt.

In other chapters, Bly writes about teaching writing at the college level, participating in writers' conferences, and the relationship of aesthetics and ethics in contemporary American literature—all in strong, clear sentences and paragraphs that move as crisply as sailboats in a fresh breeze.

The book ends with an eighty-four page collection of appendices that are so compelling and original that you'll probably end up reading them aloud to your closest teaching friends. Here, Bly offers fifteen writing exercises that hold true to her call for teaching writing from the inside out. Most of the exercises can be adapted to fit the level of students you happen to teach, and all of them are pedagogically significant. (They're also the most fun-to-read lesson plans I've ever seen, with such intriguing titles as "Writing Without Clichés About a Beautiful Place," "A Writing Exercise for Extroverts," and "An Irritating Person Exercise.")

The appendices also include usage sheets for helping teach the "literary fixes" stage of the writing process, a content-focused "Format for Writing an Essay" that offers innovative ways for student writers to organize their own thinking in ways more honest than the five-paragraph bore all those standardized writing tests so often encourage, and a truly inspirational "List of Useful Sentences for Writers in a Tight Spot"—a set of thoughtful sentences for writers to memorize and use when they need to fend off intellectual bullies.

Bly's final appendix, "The Robertson-Bly Ethics Code for Teaching Creative Writing to Middle and High School Students" is a call for honest talk about serious issues in the teaching of writing, a conversation those teenage mothers—and many other students—are continually inviting us to join. It's a great way to end a great book.

Reference

Lane, Barry. 1998. *Reviser's Toolbox*. Discover Writing Press.

Micheal Thompson is a language arts specialist at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning. He has taught high school English in the St. Paul Public Schools for fourteen years, is a graduate of the Bread Loaf School of English, and serves on the policy board for the Minnesota Writing Project.

Beyond Rhetoric

continued from page 31

appropriate. I use old essays that received an A. I explain to my students that A papers are rarely under four pages typewritten and often up to eight pages, because of the level of detail required to persuade me of A quality. If students are to explain the content learned over an entire semester or year and include detailed examples in a persuasive format, they will need to elaborate. It's possible to do this in fewer pages, but that means very tight, clever writing—something that takes as much time as writing more.

I've found that students are usually accurate and honest when giving themselves a grade. Their assessments almost always come close to mine. Students who put a lot of time into their writing do so on this essay as well, so they ask for a good grade and, as a rule, get it. Students who don't put the time in write shorter essays with less information and often get grades that reflect their previous work. But they usually recognize it and ask for a B or C.

I began using this assignment without much thought. It was a quick solution to the annoying end-of-the-term required exam. As I have reflected on the process, I've begun to see the great benefits of an assignment that elegantly combines reflection, persuasion, review, craft and detail, and the course evaluation. At first, the essay was an isolated task at the end of the year, but now I see that it can be an integrated, important part of my practice. Now I will talk more about this final project at the beginning of the year, allowing more time for planning and peer conferencing, and creating a rubric with the students for more consistent grading.

Settling down to read these exams, I realize the personal mental health benefits for me. It's a great way to combat end-of-the-year fatigue, and it helps me understand what students have found important and memorable about the class, even as, on this last day, they learn a few more things about the process of writing.

Sarah Lorenz is a teacher-consultant with the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. She teaches at Franklin Road Christian School in Novi, Michigan, where she also works with curriculum and school improvement.

How to Build Better Engineers

continued from page 35

to demonstrate the need for uniformity in format and for adhering to schedules and page limits.

The entire exercise is a lot of work for the students—and of course for me—but this process provides a valuable lesson that can help students understand the kinds of writing skills and processes they will be called upon to use in the corporate or educational world after graduation. This kind of preparation gives them a jump-start on their future.

Ron E. Smelser is an associate professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. He is affiliated with the Northwest Inland Writing Project there.

Submission Guidelines

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and the teaching of writing, as well as engaging reports by writing teachers on the research they conduct in their classrooms. Articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by teachers or researchers that address the following themes:

- balancing process and product in the classroom
- exploring connections between writing and reading
- grounding student writing in community
- evaluating how a teacher's personal writing practice relates to the teaching of writing
- examining the impact of educational standards on writing education.

If you have an idea for an article addressing one of these themes, or an idea for an article of general interest to writing teachers and researchers, give us a call at (510) 642-8886; send a query letter, draft, or completed manuscript to: *The Quarterly,* National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042; or email us at *editors@writingproject.org*. For complete writer's guidelines, please visit our Web site at *www.writingproject.org*, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the above address.

NWP

The Quarterly is a publication of the National Writing Project.

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR: Roxanne Barber
SENIOR EDITORS: Amy Bauman
Art Peterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Rebekah Truemper
COMMUNICATIONS ASSISTANT: My Lac

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Richard Sterling
CO-DIRECTORS: Judy Buchanan
Elyse Eidman-Aadahl
Mary Ann Smith
FINANCE DIRECTOR: Michel Mathis

Support for this publication is provided to the National Writing Project from the U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

ISSN 08963592

University of California
National Writing Project
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
University of California